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A CRY GURGLING UP IN THE THROAT OF OKLAHOMA NICK AS PERRY WRIGHT OPENED HIS EYES, AND STARED VACANTLY INTO THE FACE OF THE GUIDE.

OR,
Boomer Balt's Surprise Party.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "LAUGHING LEO," "OLD '49,"
"NOR' WEST NICK," "DAN BROWN OF
DENVER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FRIGHTFUL PHENOMENON.

"WHAT do ye make out of it, lad?"

Nicholas Van Bibber gave a little start as he dropped the field-glass from his eyes, and there was something of hesitation in both voice and manner as he glanced downward at his questioner.

"Be they white or red?" added Evander Wright, with a touch of impatience, born of anxiety. "Is it jest chance, or be they follerin' us on puppus? Dum it, boy!" with a sharpness in his usually placid tones, and a fiery glow in his ordinarily mild eyes. "Ef you're skeered to tell what ye see, give me the glass!"

A slight smile swept across the darkly handsome face of the guide as he resigned the field glass to his impatient companion, but his voice was grave enough as he spoke:

"White men, plain enough, Mr. Wright; but that is precious small security at this time and place."

A muttered ejaculation, that was almost an oath, came from the tightly compressed lips of the elder man. Inarticulate though this was, his companion seemed to divine its meaning, for he quickly said:

"Only a blue shirt, I'm thinking, Mr. Wright. It was that that made me slow in answering your question, a bit ago."

Evander Wright lowered the glass with a long breath of relief. A half-smile flitted across his face as he passed the instrument back to its owner, and there was a grim hardness in his tones as he said:

"Long's it ain't a blue coat, I'm satisfied. It's mighty dub'ous work fightin' Uncle Sam, but they ain't nobody else got leave nor license to block my way!"

Nicholas Van Bibber took one more look at the distant figures which had occasioned so much uneasiness, then closed his glass and wheeled his horse about.

"They're not soldiers, whatever else they may prove."

"That's all I wanted to make sure of," laughed Wright, as he strode swiftly along in pursuit of the white-tilted wagons in advance. "They're got might, ef not right, to back 'em, an' I'd heap ruther run than fight 'em; but white, red or black, as long's they hain't got the army-blue to back 'em, cain't—Lad, thar's a turrible storm brewin'!"

Almost involuntarily came the words as Evander Wright swept the sullen, lowering heavens with his keen blue eyes. Nicholas Van Bibber imitated that glance, but his gaze lingered longest when his jetty orbs were turned to the rear. The old man frowned impatiently.

"Never mind them, boy! Ef they was twenty instead of—"

"It isn't their number I'm thinkin' of," quickly interposed Van Bibber. "I'd agree to send them to the right-about myself, if I could only be sure they're not genuine bloodhounds!"

"You mean?"

"I believe they're army scouts—and you know what that means!"

A hard, gray shade settled over the face of the elder man as he broke into a run that carried him over the nearly level ground quite as rapidly as the good horse ridden by Van Bibber could trot. Evander Wright asked for no further explanation, for none was needed.

Right well he knew that he and his were acting in violation of the law; a law, although one which he deemed infamously unjust. And like all such violators, he felt a certain dread of all who were detailed to guard that law from transgression.

"I may be mistaken," added Van Bibber, as they drew nearer the two wagons, "but it won't do to run any more risks than we are obliged to. Night is near, and with this storm coming up, maybe we can give the rascals the slip. Anyway, it's well worth the risk trying."

"Still thar, pap?" cried out a tall, broad-shouldered young man from the front team as they came up. "Soldiers, or jest common truck?"

"Keep a-goin', Perry! Keep up your lick long's thar's breath in the critters!" sharply cried Wright, as he nimbly sprang into the second wagon without stopping its rapid pace in the least, snatching whip and reins from the hand of a fair young girl.

"Run it is, then, but I'd heap ruther fight it out!" growled the young giant, with a surly backward glance.

The sharp crack of his lash rung out, and his horses plunged forward rapidly, the heavy wheels making a rumble and clatter on the hard, dry ground that rendered further conversation out of the question.

Though the loads were heavy, the pace was remarkably good in the absence of a road. Just here the ground was comparatively smooth and level, and the wild grass was not rank enough to conceal the occasional hollows and bumps. Strong and steady hands held the reins, and the good horses covered the ground with remarkable rapidity, considering how heavily they were handicapped.

Nicholas Van Bibber cast many a backward look, and as those in the rear wagon, beside which he rode, glanced anxiously into his face, they saw that old puzzled expression there still.

"They follow—but only seem trying to keep the same distance!" he cried, with a frown, in answer to the mute question of Evander Wright. "I don't understand it at all!"

"Playin' cat to our mice, mebbe!" grated the old man, his eyes flaming, his massive jaws setting still more firmly. "Waal, we'll try to make it interestin' fer 'em, anyhow—dum 'em!"

It was a flight, and yet those fleeing felt that they were in the right. Like many another of those days, they felt they were being wronged, instead of transgressing against the right.

Evander Wright, among so many others, caught the "Oklahoma fever" in its most virulent shape, and was now on his way to "the land of milk and honey."

Nicholas Van Bibber—Oklahoma Nick, as he was better known—was mainly responsible for

all this, though he had never directly urged or advised Wright to abandon his comfortable Nebraska home. But he had so often sung the praises of the Promised Land. Had painted its charms with such a master hand. Was so unstinted in its eulogy, that no man with a trace of nomadic instinct remaining could help but feel strongly tempted to make the venture. And when Evander Wright finally concluded to go to Oklahoma, despite the positive prohibitions which had come from Washington, Nicholas Van Bibber entered into the project with remarkable vigor and earnestness.

It was through his advice that Evander Wright kept clear of all the "Colony." Where there was no fighting to be done, in union there was weakness and danger.

"It is the big band which the soldiers will be watching for," he argued, with a good show of reason. "A small party may slip through where a large one would be sure of detection. If we can lodge the army scouts until the border is fairly crossed, we're safe enough."

The border was crossed in safety, by a route far west of that usually taken by the "boomers." Day after day Oklahoma guided the family further into the Nation. Day after day passed without bringing either the "boys in blue" or the still more dreaded scouts into view. Until this day.

While hitching up for a fresh start after dinner, keen-eyed Oklahoma Nick caught a glimpse of a small party of horsemen at a great distance, thanks to his good field-glass. He said nothing at first, but hurried up their preparations, and slightly altered their line of travel, to take advantage of a change in the nature of the ground. The alteration was not great, but ere long it would give them partial cover, of timber islands, and broken ground.

Oklahoma Nick kept his discovery to himself until well along in the afternoon, though conscious that the party of horsemen were still hanging to their trail. At least it had that appearance, though the party showed no positive signs of wanting to overtake them. Instead, they seemed content to maintain the same average distance.

Then bright-eyed Otelia Wright discovered the horsemen, and called the attention of her father to them. Not that she anticipated trouble or danger, just then, but rather as something to break the monotony of that long, uneventful journey.

Otelia was a true woman, in that she took it for granted that her father could do no wrong. In a vague way she understood that the Government disliked the idea of settlers crowding into Oklahoma, but that was all. If it was wrong, her father would not be acting thus.

Even before Evander Wright made this discovery, he was growing a little anxious about the weather. Though the heavens were clear and cloudless, there was an oppressive stillness in the atmosphere that warned him, as by instinct, of a brewing storm.

Though the air seemed so clear, the sun looked strangely blurred and unnatural. Its beams seemed intercepted by an invisible screen. One could hardly say that the sun was hot, yet one felt almost as if confined in an oven. The slightest exertion brought forth profuse sweat. One's lungs labored, as though they lacked air.

Then, far away to the north rose a long, heavy bank of clouds, slowly, hardly perceptible in its growing when watched, but seeming to indicate a heavy storm from that quarter.

Despite his anxiety about the party of horsemen who hung so persistently on their trail, Evander Wright drew a long breath of relief as he saw these clouds.

"A wettin', mebbe, but not what this turrible close air made me expect," he muttered, more to himself than to his wife or daughter.

Like him, they involuntarily glanced toward the southwest. Like him they were thinking of the terrible tornado; of the "cyclone" and "twister" before whose might the works of man are but as chaff.

Despite their long residence in the West, they had not as yet actually witnessed one of these terrible phenomena, though they knew in what quarter to look for the scourge.

Steadily the cloud-bank to the north spread and rose in height, and occasionally there could be seen a swift dart of lightning through the dense mass. But it rose very slowly, and as yet naught of thunder could be distinguished.

"It is a chance, anyway," said Oklahoma Nick, as they pressed doggedly on. "A heavy rain will wipe out our trail, and if we can keep ahead of those fellows until it comes—well, with the storm and the night, I reckon we'll bother them a bit, anyway!"

All this was before even the powerful glass could distinguish the garb of their shadows with sufficient distinctness to remove the natural dread of soldiers: before the brief conversation with which this record is opened.

And during the interval, there came a great ominous change in the state of the heavens.

Although there was not a breath of air perceptible, the cloud-bank behind them ceased to rise; was steadily lowering as though being driven back by a gale. And far away in the west and south, other banks were rising, their

edges sharply outlined, yet seemingly with a misty veil hovering before and over them.

Not a cloud as yet had risen to intercept the direct rays of the sun, yet in this there was a change, peculiar, impressive. A change that would have alarmed the "boomers" had their thoughts been less wholly with the horsemen who hung so obstinately to their rear.

The rays of the sun changed from yellow to reddish, then slowly altered to a metallic tinge, bright yet unnatural, something like the peculiar tint which heralds an eclipse. The light seemed mellow, yet it was trying to the eyes. Any steady gaze resulted in an aching pain; in causing the orbs to water.

Only for those shadowing riders Evander Wright would have hastened to camp to prepare for a storm of no ordinary magnitude; but now he dared not do that.

If these men were soldiers, he knew they could have but one mission there. He knew they must be on the lookout for venturesome "boomers," to arrest and turn them back from the promised land.

His blood fairly boiled as he thought of this, but at the same time he knew that they had the law on their side, with the Government and the army to back them. He knew that he dared not fight against such an arrest, unjust, illegal, as he firmly considered it.

There was but the one chance; a miserably frail one, too! In less than an hour's time the horsemen could overtake them, press on as desperately as they might. Why they had not done so ere this, he could only explain by a brutal malice: "playing cat to their mice."

During the brief halt for the purpose of clearing making out the party to the rear, a great and startling change had come over the sky.

The long, low cloud-banks to the south and west had split in twain and taken on altogether different shapes. That directly in front of them was still dense and solid, nearly black in the center, shading out to the edges, which seemed penciled in fire.

But to the southwest appeared the greatest change.

The clouds had suddenly shot up high in the heavens, spreading out as they rose into the shape of an umbrella. Every edge was sharply outlined, yet constantly changing in shape and color, though the prevailing hue was a strange, ghastly green.

Here and there shot out lurid streaks, not lightning, though somewhat resembling it. Like huge, distorted serpents they seemed, twisting and writhing in full view for a moment, then darting into the green mass as though diving into water, to give place to still other and more fantastic shapes.

You have seen the "dissolving views" cast by a deftly manipulated magic-lantern? Where the brilliant figures whirl and seem to be swallowing each other, the streaks and bands of color vanishing in the center to reappear at the edges!

Just so the greenish mass of clouds began to work as the boomers urged their horses on over the dry, hard plain with whip and voice. Just so the rising bank began to writhe and twist and whirl about in mad confusion, yet with a terrible precision that held the bright blue eyes of Otelia Wright spellbound.

Never before had she witnessed such a frightfully glorious spectacle. Frightful—yet she was unable to avert her eyes.

The greenish light deepened and intensified. The sun was still shining, but with a ghastly impotence that only rendered the scene more awe-inspiring.

Then—it was like magic!

A brief space of mad whirling, where the clouds seemed to crush together, obliterating the clear outlines, spreading the fiery serpents in a lurid blur over the mass. Then the mass shot still higher, its top looking like a flattened balloon. The clouds nearer the horizon were whirled off like spray from the bows of a clipper, leaving a solid inverted pyramid, the point of which was swaying swiftly, seemingly from side to side as viewed by the startled boomers.

There could be no further doubt. Even one who had never witnessed a tornado, could make no mistake in this!

The terrible "cyclone" was upon them!

"A twister!" shouted Oklahoma Nick, his voice hoarse and unnatural as he spurred his snorting, trembling steed closer to the rear wagon. "Veer to the left, and run for your lives!"

Even as he uttered the words, he leaned far forward and shot a strong arm about the waist of Otelia Wright, snatching her from the wagon seat with as much seeming ease as though she were but a child in size and weight.

A sharp cry of angry surprise broke from her lips.

"How dare—"

"I'll save you, darling!" cried Oklahoma Nick, his voice scarcely recognizable as he drew her before him, clasping her almost fiercely as she instinctively struggled to break away and return to her parents. "Save you—or we'll die—"

"Together," he said, but the word never reached even his own ears.

An appalling roar suddenly came across the plain, borne on the wings of a blast so mighty that it actually staggered the horses, and lifted the heavy wagons on two wheels as the father and son instinctively changed the course of their teams in obedience to the wild cry of their guide.

Only the one blast. Then a frightful stillness took its place, and the imperiled travelers panted, gasped, as they sought to regain the breath driven from their lungs by that *avant courier* of the "twister."

It was like being caught in a vacuum. That howling blast seemed to have taken every breath of air with it as it went sweeping over the dry plain.

"Drive—it's life or death!" panted Oklahoma Nick, savagely plunging spurs into the quivering flanks of his good horse, heading a little east of south, racing away at top speed, clasping the still struggling maiden in his strong arms.

One glance at that frightful monster in the distance—just long enough to see that terrible tongue sweeping the plain in fantastic circles, licking up the grass and dirt and whirling a great wave of both commingled to the right and the left—and then the two men lashed their frightened horses, rolling swiftly, desperately over the prairie, running a race with death!

A mighty roar filled the air. A roar as of a thousand loaded trains rushing over a vast bridge, so far as volume was concerned; but how vastly more frightful!

Only one who has heard the voice of such a tornado can even faintly imagine its nature. Only one who has seen the devastating monster from a safe point of observation can even dimly picture its horrible beauty—fascinating repulsiveness.

The wide-spreading top of lurid greenness, constantly swallowing itself in the center and curling up and over and inward again from all sides. The monstrous tongue of death and destruction sweeping around in a frightful circle, tearing great trenches in the ground, hurling dirt and grass and rocks about like playthings, then curling up and writhing in the air like the scorched tongue of a monstrous serpent, only to straighten out again after a mighty leap, to seek fresh objects on which to wreak its fury.

Thus in monstrous leaps came the "twister," in a direct line for the apparently doomed boomers. And even, as they watched its coming with fear-distended eyes, seeming to veer to the left, as though resolved to claim its victims!

And mingling with that deafening roar, came wild shrieks and wails as of human beings suffering the tortures of the damned, only with voices magnified a thousandfold.

"Together—in death," gasped Oklahoma Nick, bowing his head closer over the quivering form in his arms as though he could thus protect her from the screaming blast that now assailed them.

He drove his bloody spurs again and again to the sockets in the flanks of his steed, though that poor creature was already striving his utmost to outrun death. He felt the animal stagger, felt him reel unsteadily as the whirling blast assailed them with howling fury, and a fierce curse grated through his clinched teeth as he jerked on the bridle-reins to steady the poor animal.

"On you brute! For her—for my love!"

He lifted his head and tried to note how near that frightful engine of death and destruction had come, but in vain. The fierce blast tore the hat from his head, and sent a million piercing pangs through his scalp, as though his hair was being torn out in one mighty handful. The sand and dirt pelted his face and filled his eyes, shutting out all sight. It was like staring at a blank wall at midnight.

"On—save us, you brute!" he gasped, hardly realizing what he strove to cry aloud, but what was only dimly impressed upon his brain; for the human voice was as naught in that awful tumult. "To lose her now! To lose—to lose—"

Even thought was denied him as the fury of the wind seemed to increase a thousandfold. He was only conscious that they were being carried to one side, their onward progress checked by a power too great for mortal strength to cope with. He knew that his horse was being twisted from its feet, despite its frantic struggles. He knew that they were caught in that frightful vortex, out of which so few have come with life!

Even in that awful moment, when death in one of its most awful forms seemed claiming them, his love conquered. He tried to pronounce the name of his loved one. He even sought to reach her lips with his, all blinded as he was. But in vain.

He felt her torn from his arms, and then—unconsciousness!

CHAPTER II.

"A KANSAS ZEPHYR."

"Ain't gittin' shivery, be ye, pard? Don't feel like they was any resk o' buttin' the nose o' ye ram-up ag'inst the North Pole afore ye know it? I'm kinder tender o' my own self, but ruther then hev ye sp'ile the prittiness o' that sweet mug by frostin' an' freezin', dummed ef I wouldn't shed my outside wraps—only say the word, pard."

"Do you often have it this way?" panted the

man addressed, mopping his face with a bandanna that was almost as damp.

"Alays, when the sign's right," with a half-malicious grin.

"Because, if you do, I've settled one obscure geographical fact that has often troubled me. It was right here, or hereabouts, that the old man stopped to take a drink from a boiling spring, spluttering out as he beat a hasty retreat: 'Run fer it, sonny! Hell ain't a mile from this section!'"

"Pardner, that was my own dad, an' I was that same sonny," impressively uttered the other, leaning over in his saddle and extending a strong, bronzed hand. "That spring is jest over yan-way a bit, an' I'm goin' to take you to see it, so's when you git off that ole chestnut ag'in you kin bolster it up with genuine facts."

"Show it up, Balt, if you love me," with feeble energy. "I want to take a dip in its boiling waters to cool off. So, you brute!" as his horse stepped on a loose stone and nearly dropped to its knees. "Careful—disturb my equal-abraham too much, and my melted flesh will pour out over my boot-tops."

"You ain't hot?" blurted the old man, his dark eyes widely distended, mock surprise wrinkling up his rosy visage.

"Sprinkle me with sugar, and I'd be ice-cream," languidly murmured his companion, dropping from the saddle, and fanning himself with a broad-brimmed hat. "Empty a few polar bears over my topworks, and all I lack of being an iceberg is a puddle of salt water to float in. Hot? Dare to even whisper that word again, Boomer Balt, and I'll slit your blessed wizen with an icicle!"

Boomer Balt chuckled softly as he swung himself from the saddle and stood beneath the same shade his companion had sought. This sort of badinage seemed to suit his tastes, though a close observer might have noticed a trace of uneasiness in the glance with which he swept that portion of the heavens visible from their present location.

"Waal, I hev see'd signs o' frost a leetle mite thicker, pard, even in these parts, whar—"

"Boomer Balt, you're a fraud!" drawled his companion, with a weary wave of his hand. "You're a delusion and a snare. It tears my tender heart wide open to even hint such a thing, but truth is mighty, and will prevail. You're an impostor, Boomer Balt. You're a confidence-man of the most undisguised sort, Boomer Balt, and it's my confidence you're fattening on just at present."

"Nothin' wuss then that?" grinned the old man.

"Your very title is a misnomer," languidly added the other, without noticing the interruption. "Spell it Bummer, for Boomer don't suit the skeleton you've tried to draw it over. What did I hire you for, anyway?" starting to a sitting posture, scowling ferociously.

"You tell, critter," grunted Boomer Balt, with a shrug of his broad shoulders and another searching glance across the visible sky.

"To guide me into the wilderness, otherwise called Oklahoma, the Promised Land, the glorious region where milk and honey fills the pastures knee-deep, and longevity is inhaled at every breath. Instead—Tartarus! Tophet! Hades! Twin-vowel-between-two-consonants! Old man, you've either lost your reckoning, or else you're an emissary of the Evil One, paid to bring unwary travelers into the infernal regions by the overland route! And if we aren't within rapping distance of those very portals vulgarly termed the gates of *ahem!* then this atmosphere is abominably deceiving!"

"Ef you're ready, reckon we'd better be moseyin', pard," bluntly cut in Boomer Balt, all humor fading out of his face as he scanned the heavens, his flexible nostrils quivering like those of a hound just striking a fresh scent.

"Impossible, my dear fellow," with a faint gasp. "Fetch your wonderful spring to me, if I must see it. Don't ask me to move—don't!"

"Hitch your critter. The climbin' 'il be too up-an'-down fer anythin' that hain't got ten good toes. We kin see a good bit from up yan-way, I reckon," with a searching look at the rocky height before them.

"Couldn't you fetch him down to me?" with languid entreaty in face and voice. "Or else you do the bargaining in my name? I'll appoint you my deputy, and surely you're cunning enough to cheat even the Old Boy!"

Boomer Balt turned abruptly and stared keenly into the face of his companion, and there was a shadow on his own countenance as of one who was wearying of idle folly. A light in his dark eyes that caused an instantaneous change to come over the face of the other.

"You're in earnest, Balt?" he uttered, in a brisk, business-like tone in strong contrast to the one he had thus far used. "You have an object in taking this climb?"

"It's heap too hot fer that sort o' funnin', pard," with a dry little laugh. "I'm goin' up vender fer a good look. You kin go, or you kin stay, jest as suits ve best."

"Go it is, then," and Henry Hornkohl sprang to his feet, active, energetic, business-like from top to toe. "Still, if it isn't against your religion, I'd like to meekly ask—what in thunder do

you expect to gain by this little expedition, anyway?"

Again Boomer Balt gazed at him with that strange intentness, and a suspicious man might have read suspicion in that look. His eyes were filled with a bright glow, his lips parted as though to speak, but closed again with an audible sound as though their owner was turning a key on what he fancied might prove an imprudent speech.

Henry Hornkohl showed his strong white teeth for a moment, his bearded lips curling just a trifle as he laughed:

"I only asked for information, Balt, but I take it all back. Go ahead, and count me in on the ground floor. I'm not partial to going it blind, but after an hour or two of this blessed atmosphere, a man needn't fear anything or any change; it can't be for the worse!"

Boomer Balt laughed softly as he proceeded to tie their horses firmly to adjacent trees by their trail-ropes, shortened for that purpose. All his lightness came back to his voice as he spoke again:

"A body'd almost take you fer a tenderfoot from the fringe o' the risin' sun, Coldhorn, to lis'en. A body'd think you didn't know what this dead heat means, mostly!"

"It means sweat, Boomer Balt," and Henry Hornkohl mopped his streaming brow, then wrung the drops from his limp handkerchief. "And if that's the measure, a two-story bakery won't be large enough to hold our rations of the staff of life this day—no sir!"

Boomer Balt turned away and faced the steep with a shrug of his shoulders. This was not the first time he had given over the attempt to read his comrade. Not the first time he felt half-angry, half-uneasy at failing to penetrate beneath that plausible exterior.

From the very first he decided that Henry Hornkohl was playing a part. That this brisk, voluble, yet secretive fellow, was holding something important in reserve. That he was more than he wished to appear in the eyes of the man whom he had selected to guide him into the forbidden country.

For such was their present relation.

Nearly a month before they had met for the first time, far to the north of their present location, on the level monotonous plains of Nebraska. In a modest, unobtrusive way, Henry Hornkohl was making inquiries concerning a family named Wright. A common enough name, but not so the prefixes: Evander, Permelia, Otelia, Pericles: only one family could boast of such an odd array.

Curiously enough, Boomer Balt was interested in this same family, although he asked no open questions, seeming to prefer gaining the information he desired after another and more round-about fashion. And when it became known to both that the Wright family had sold out at a sacrifice, in order to join the mad rush to Oklahoma, it was not long before Henry Hornkohl engaged Boomer Balt as guide to that delectable region. Not long, but only after satisfying himself that the old man was not an impostor in claiming intimate knowledge of the Nation. With map in hand he questioned Balt as to the country, only closing the bargain when fully satisfied that the guide was competent to act as such.

As he briskly scaled the rocky steep, Boomer Balt looked every inch the ideal guide. Tall, broad-shouldered, athletic, wonderfully lithe and active for a man far past the meridian of life, as his long hair and beard of almost snowy whiteness indicated. A nobler-looking ancient despite his age, with his superb figure, stooped at the shoulders only when in inaction.

His eyes were brilliant as though still in the prime of life, and his face was rosy with the bloom of health and active cut-door life. Take away his white hair and beard, and one would have set him down as still a young man.

Henry Hornkohl looked more the product of city life, as he claimed to be, though of the better sort. If he had burned the midnight oil in his profession—that of lawyer, as he confessed—it was clear that he had not neglected his physical training. Neither tall nor short, but of a happy medium, he was what is called "a deceiving man" in his make, physically speaking; one who would "strip well," and show a much larger development of muscle than a casual glance indicated.

He was a half-brune in complexion, and since the twain took up their route to Oklahoma in quest of the Wright family, he had permitted his beard to grow at will. It was thick, yet silken, of a chestnut hue, and really made him look handsomer than when only the tiny, close-clipped tufts bore his ears company, as when Boomer Balt first met him. In age he might have been anything from thirty to forty years, and despite his "city clothes," now rather worn and travel-stained, he was a more than ordinarily attractive man.

Like Boomer Balt, Henry Hornkohl was well-armed; each waist was encircled by-cartridge-belt, which carried a full supply of cartridges for the revolvers at their hips, and others for the repeating rifles which they left in the slings on their saddles.

Despite his former languid demeanor, Henry

Hornkohl kept close at the heels of his active guide, climbing with him, giving never a sigh or moan of fatigue. Though the great drops of sweat rolled down his face and bade fair to drench the few remaining dry threads upon him, he said nothing, nor stopped to brush them aside. It was a tough climb under the most favorable circumstances, but doubly trying with the air so frightfully close and sultry.

There was a grim smile on the face of Boomer Balt as he climbed on, keeping straight ahead, like one scorning to lengthen the route by picking and choosing his way. He never cast a glance backward, but Henry Hornkohl knew that the eccentric old fellow was purposely testing his grit and endurance. His brown eyes lit up as he saw this, but that was the only change. And when Boomer Balt at length came to a pause, on the crest of the ridge, it was a calm, unconcerned face into which he gazed with a half-smile on his bearded lips.

"Rather tryin' on his legs an' lungs, eh?" he grinned.

"Did you find it so?" with a surprised uplifting of brows, but which quickly gave place to an apologetic smile. "I forgot—you're not quite so young as you were once, and of course you feel these little things more than a younger man. Never hurry yourself on my account, Balt. I'm in no particular hurry, and can wait until you get back your wind. In fact—as we started for nowhere in particular, maybe this is the place: eh?"

Boomer Balt made no reply in words, but there was a trace of angry impatience in that shrug of his shoulders as he turned and gazed keenly, intently, far away over the plain which lay before them.

Over their head the sky was clear and unclouded, though the sun shone with a curious light. But far away along the horizon the clouds were piling up in a curious, almost awe-inspiring manner.

"Looks as though we might get a shower," drawled Hornkohl, after a brief but thorough scanning of the vast expanse before them, broken only by an occasional clump of trees, a patch of undergrowth, a hollow or a slight mound.

Boomer Balt turned toward him with a quickness that might well have startled an ordinary man; but Henry Hornkohl was not one of that sort. He placidly met that keen, searching gaze, a languid curiosity growing in his dark eyes as he saw how eager, how strongly moved the old guide was.

"Did I say anything out of the way, dear fellow?" he murmured, to be cut short by the guide, who laughed harshly as he uttered:

"You play it mighty well, critter, but it won't hold water! You ain't nigh so green as ye try to make out; you know right well what all this means! I tell you, critter, you've been thar!"

"Or tharabouts—of course," yawned Hornkohl, dropping down on a convenient stone, removing his hat to fan his glowing countenance. "Don't betray me, will you? Think of my suffering wife and interesting family of kids, who would—eh?"

Boomer Balt flung out one hand with a short, hard laugh.

"You play it mighty well; so well that it'd be a shame fer the likes o' me to sp'ile the fun. I ain't goin' to try it. You kin keep on playin' innercent as long as ye like, fer me. But ef I ain't wide off my base, yender is crawlin' up a old acquaintance who'll bu'st your play inter sober airnest afore many more minnits—sure!"

"Give it up!" feebly muttered Hornkohl, after a puzzled look all about them. "Too hot for guessing riddles that have no answer—unless in your own imagination. I can see nobody, friend or stranger. As for spirits, it's too wretchedly hot for the only sort a close search would unearth in this select company!"

Boomer Balt shrugged his shoulders once more, then stood erect with folded arms, gazing over the plain at the rising storm-clouds.

Already there was a change to his practiced eyes. More than ever was he convinced that a "twister" was brewing in the far distance. And half-unconsciously there came from his bearded lips:

"Heaven protect the ones it finds in its path!"

"It does begin to look rather crawly, don't it," softly uttered his employer, with plainly growing interest as he watched the curious shapes which the clouds were assuming. "And what a strange light! Yet there is no eclipse on the docket, that I'm aware of!"

"Clipse be blowed!" grunted Boomer Balt, giving a start at that soft speech, his cheeks flushing a little deeper, as one will change color when one finds an unthought-of auditor. "That's a twister!"

"What people call cyclone, eh?" ejaculated Hornkohl, with increased interest, as he sprung to his feet. "Glad of it! I've been stuffed with wild tales of wind and storm since I came into this blessed country, and now I'll take notes to squelch the next fellow who dares come at me with his patent-insides exaggerations! But maybe this is only a *baby* cyclone!" with a short, half-mocking laugh.

"They all come full-grown, critter, when

they do come," retorted Boomer Balt, with grim curtness. "When you see *one*, you'll never itch to be in the same State with another, now I tell ye!"

"You, too?" murmured Hornkohl, with a reproachful look, as he moved back and resumed his seat on the moss-grown boulder.

Yet he could not keep his eyes long away from the storm-cloud beyond. There was a strange fascination which even his skepticism could not conquer; a peculiar attraction in the wild scene that kept his gaze riveted on the rapidly growing, shifting mass of destructiveness.

"Beg pardon, critter," nodded Boomer Balt, grinning sardonically as he nodded over his shoulder, never once removing his gaze from the clouds. "Fergot that you wasn't a tenderfoot, fer a minnit. Habit, ye know. Got so used to stuffin' them pore critters with wind—second-hand, ye know—that I spoke without thinkin'."

"So I thought."

"Bein' acclimated, you ain't noways oneasy, in course," resumed the white-haired guide, with smooth volubility, yet with a peculiar air of only half realizing what his lips uttered. "Bin through a dozen, I reckon? Bin rolled up an' flattened out reg'lar twicet a year, shouldn't wonder? Feel lost ef ye was to go through a season 'thout hev'in' one or two Kansas zephyrs callin' to ye down the air-hole of a cyclone cave? Fergot that ye used to live in the Windy State, afore Maurice North— Did you say anythin', pard?"

Boomer Balt turned swiftly, his eyes all aglow as they rested intently on the handsome face of the lawyer from the East. One could almost swear he expected to make some important discovery in that face from his peculiar manner; but if so, he was doomed to disappointment.

"I never resided in Kansas, and only lived there long enough to cross it from north to south," was the quiet response. "You can figure that out, since you bore me company. Really, that is growing interesting!" a bright light leaping into his dark eyes as a sudden change came over the storm-clouds. "Old Boreas is putting up his umbrella, as though afraid of gettin' wet!"

The same peculiar phenomena that first aroused the fears of the Wright family, now enchained the attention of the two men on the rock-ridge. The fatal signal—the flattened balloon—was making its appearance, though still so far away.

"God pity the pore critters that comes under that shade!" muttered the guide, his voice growing husky, his bronzed cheeks paling.

"I can see no signs of human life between us and the cloud."

"It's miles and miles further then human eye kin measure, keen as them in the head o' ye may be, critter!" impatiently cried Balt with a frown, as he shook his head like one commanding silence. "Ef your clapper must be runnin', better be prayin' that them you're seekin' ain't in the path o' that monster. Ef they be—God protect them!"

This ejaculation was so different from aught which he had ever heard from the lips of his usually jolly, reckless guide, that Henry Hornkohl was strongly impressed with the impending peril; more than he would have been by the most fluent description mortal lips could have given him of the terrific power those rolling clouds contained.

In silence he watched the progress of the change, growing intensely interested, despite the strange sense of awe which was stealing over him, as the "twister" became more and more distinctly defined.

Their point of observation could not have been better chosen. They had a fair, unobstructed view of the frightful phenomena; of the rapidly shifting clouds, of the lurid serpents which shot back and forth in a network of writhings, of the unfolding masses of greenish clouds.

The eyes could note each change, but what pen can paint them distinctly enough for the human eye to see?

"It's full growed an' a-boomin', now!" muttered Boomer Balt, with a long-drawn breath as his tall figure grew more erect, and shook itself as though to cast off a stupefying spell. "Ef it comes *this* way, we'll hev a mighty tight pinch of it our own selves!"

"And coming it is!" cried Hornkohl, with eyes riveted on the terribly fascinating mass of death and destruction. "If it strikes us fairly—what then?"

A short, hard laugh from those white-bearded lips—a laugh that under the circumstances sounded almost impious.

"Pends on the sort o' record we've left ahind us, Coldhorn! You ain't gittin' skeered *this* quick?"

There was a thinly disguised sneer in his tones, but Henry Hornkohl gave that no thought, just then. For once in his life he was willing to admit this fright. Never again would he be skeptical when marvelous tales of wind storms were uttered in his hearing. Though as yet only a faint roaring sound came to their ears, and he could see but a swirling wave of dirt and grass and rocks to denote the frightful power of the wind-demon, he was converted.

"You can have my share—I'm going to hunt a hole!" he spluttered, turning and dashing down the steep hill up which they had toiled so arduously a few minutes before.

"Do as I do!" cried Boomer Balt, leaping past the lawyer, active as the younger man was. "It'll hit funder up, but may come down the ridge. Ef it does—say your prayers now, fer you hain't got much time to waste!"

In jerks the words came, not as printed here. In jerks, as though forced out by those mighty strides that carried the guide swiftly to the little hollow, or rather valley, at the risk of breaking his neck.

Close behind him came Henry Hornkohl, and only for the strong support lent him by the guide, the lawyer would have dashed with dangerous force against a mighty rock that stood at the base of the hill.

"We've got a minnit or two pard," cried Boomer Balt, his voice almost drowned by the fierce blast that swept howlingly in advance of the storm proper. "Keep cool, or you're gone fer keeps!"

He was glancing hurriedly about them, as well as his dirt-filled eyes would permit, searching for a favorable covert where they might hope to escape death by the twister.

"Mebbe it'll jump over when it hits the hill. It *does* do it, sometimes. Ef it *don't*—waal, you'll hev a tall story to tell ef you come out of it with life!"

"Under this rock—no wind could move it!" eagerly cried Hornkohl, breaking away from the guide's grasp and crouching down close under the lee of the monster mass of rock against which he had so nearly dashed in his descent.

"All right!" panted Balt, as he imitated the action. "Ef it jumps over, we're all right. Ef it draps down here, this is as good a way to die as any other!"

"But no wind can stir such an enormous mass as this!" gasped Hornkohl, his eyes gleaming wildly, his face pale as its coating of dust would admit.

"A twister kin move anythin' it tackles, pard!"

Another swirl of wind, less violent than the first, put an end to all speech, and covering their faces with their soft felt hats, the two imperiled men lay close under the mighty rock, shivering with the indescribable terror which comes upon the strongest and bravest under such circumstances.

A brief whirl of wind—then an appalling silence about them, though afar off they could hear the frightful roaring of the twister. They seemed suddenly plunged into a vacuum, where every breath of air had been exhausted. And at the same time some horrible power seemed pressing them against the ground with a force that bade fair to crush them to a boneless pulp!

The unutterable horror of those moments! Moments when measured by the ordinary standard of time, but ages in experience!

Then—the whole world seemed filled with howling, shrieking, screaming demons of destruction!

Involuntarily Henry Hornkohl lifted his hat from his face and glared out from his covert.

To see the heavens above them filled with madly whirling clouds. With trunks of trees and great boulders, tumbling and whirling end for end, splintering to bits as the wind demons grasped them, breaking to gravel as though being melted in the maw of a volcano!

Saw the horrible tongue of the twister whirling about, yet dropping lower and lower—saw this, then cowered closer to the earth with a gasping prayer for mercy!

Then—the uproar fairly deafened them. The frightful weight that crushed them down grew more and more immense. The breath was driven out of their tortured lungs. A million red-hot needles seemed piercing their skins. Death itself seemed far preferable to another second of such horrible torture.

And yet not a breath of air seemed to touch them, as yet. Though in the very center of the cyclone, not even a corner of their garments fluttered. Though the tongue of death hovered over them, its wide circles rapidly contracting, with the mighty rock for a center, they were still spared.

Then—they felt as though being driven far down into the earth—as though that mass of rock was being turned over upon them. They strove to shriek aloud in their agony of mind and body, but in vain.

A ten-fold roar—a frightful plucking at their bodies as if a thousand demons were tearing them limb from limb! Then—

CHAPTER III.

THE MAD FREAKS OF A "TWISTER."

WITH a whirling, dizzy brain Henry Hornkohl stared about him, rapidly batting his eyes to clear his vision, gingerly moving, doubtfully breathing, as one who doubts his powers in either direction.

All about him seemed joining in a giddy, reckless dance, whirling and swaying, nodding and bowing, while the once solid earth beneath him was acting with an abominable lack of decorum, see-sawing to and fro for a breath, then

quivering all over like a mound of jelly fresh turned out of its mold, and winding up with an awful lurch that made him clutch frantically with stiffened fingers to keep from being cast out into space, as a novel sort of satellite!

It was a horrible sensation while it lasted, which, fortunately, was not for many moments. The mad whirling ceased abruptly. Faint and indistinct the dizzy-brained man heard the sound of a human voice. He could not distinguish the words, but it seemed to him as though the owner of that voice was commanding the earth to cease its erratic waltzing, and bidding it behave itself.

With a gasping groan that mingled pain with relief, Henry Hornkohl again lifted himself to a sitting posture, staring around him with his half-blinded eyes. He wanted to thank the being who had interfered just in time to save him from being hurled off into space. And some hardly articulate words did drop from his parched lips as he dimly made out a grotesque face and head before him. Only a head, floating on a grayish cloud of smoke, it seemed to his poor eyes, at first a head with a face that seemed fully as wildly grotesque as the mad fancies that still lingered in his sadly upset brain.

A peculiar halo seemed to encircle the head, now looking like dim fog-wreaths, then changing into myriads of tiny serpents, coiling and writhing in every direction with their slender bodies, but ever with their diamond-like eyes turned upon him. At first there seemed to be a benevolent, kindly look upon the floating face, in full keeping with the merciful command to which the crazy world had meekly submitted; but as he stared the bewildered man saw this change to an awful grin that threatened to divide face and head horizontally.

"Waal, how'd ye like it, fur's ye got, Corn-hole?"

That voice could not be mistaken, and Hornkohl gave a gasping cry as the fantastic scales dropped from his smarting eyes for good and all.

"It's you? Then we didn't—we ain't—"

Speech failed him, and he clasped his throbbing temples with both hands as he glanced dizzily about him, making a feeble effort to arise.

"Give it up," drawled the guide, sending out a lazy coil of smoke from both nostrils as he gazed with half-closed eyes at the bewildered fellow. "They's only one thing I'm dead sure of, an' that is ef I've got anythin' like as dirty a mug onto me es you hev, they's goin' to be a turrible drought in these parts, notwithstandin' the rain that's on the way—that's right here, I should say!"

For with his last words, a sharp gust of wind came swirling up the valley, bringing the first drops of the rain that invariably follows a storm of this description.

Henry Hornkohl paid no attention to speaker or drenching drops. He had staggered to his feet, staring almost stupidly around. Only for a few moments. Then his whirling brain grew clearer, as he realized how wonderful had been their escape from death.

The huge mass of rock was gone, a basin-like depression in the earth alone marking the spot where it had rested for ages and ages. Although the fact seemed incredible, still it *was* a fact; the wind had caught up that enormous weight and hurled it aside, without so much as breaking the skin of either of the two men who lay beneath it for shelter from the storm.*

"Lookin' fer the dornick, Wholecorn?" lazily asked Boomer Balt, who seemed to take pleasure in twisting the name of his employer awry. "Ef it'd 'a' bin a full-growed cyclone, you couldn't hope to find it 'thout a s'arch-warrant long enough to reach the North Pole."

There was an echo of lazy scorn in his voice as he nodded across the valley to where the huge mass had been dropped by the wind, more than a hundred yards away.

Like one in a dream, Henry Hornkohl crossed the valley and stood staring at the rock, mute evidence of the frightful power of that monster whose fatal tongue had almost swept his face as he glanced upward in that awful moment.

He could not comprehend how he had escaped with life. And though he was not what is called a religious man, as he stood there in awed silence, there was a prayer in his heart, deep and earnest.

The voice of Boomer Balt broke upon him with a disagreeable jar.

"Not so bad fer jest a straight zephyr, pard! Ef it'd bin a genuine twister, now, you'd see this hull section flattened out smooth as your hand an' powdered fine enough fer plantin'— Eh?"

He started back with mock surprise as Hornkohl turned sharply with uplifted hand, his dark brows gathered, his reddened eyes flaming, his voice husky as he uttered:

"Silence, you scoffer! It is worse than blas-

phemy after what we have witnessed. Instead of lying, you should be on your knees praying!"

A quick change came over the face of the guide, and both it and his voice were sober enough as he extended a hand toward his employer.

"Ef you look at it *that way*—shake! The jokin' come only from my lips, pard; down in the heart o' me I'm jest as thankful to the great an' good Lord as you kin be! Only His marcy saved our lives."

Their hands met in a grasp far more fervent and friendly than ever before. Men who have passed through such a trial in company can never be enemies again.

But men of our days are seldom effusive or dramatic when their deeper and better feelings are stirred. A firm hand-grip, a brief gaze and a faint smile; then each drew back with an abashed feeling, which each tried to cover by an affectation of careless ease and lightness.

"Then you admit that this was something more than a baby-cyclone, Uncle Balt?" half-laughed Hornkohl.

"Pritty nigh old enough to vote, pardner, an' growin' older all the time," was the frank admission. "I ain't a-sayin' it's the wurst I ever did see, mind ye, but— What's that?"

Briskly as the guide uttered these sentences, he was hardly equal to meeting that quizzical smile, and his dust-reddened eyes were shifting restlessly about them as he spoke. They were suddenly arrested by a slowly swaying object under the shattered stump of what had been but a few minutes before a grand old tree, and with a startled exclamation he sprang forward to investigate.

Though still in the dark as to what this meant Henry Hornkohl followed hard upon his heels, to see Boomer Balt spreading out a tattered breadth of heavy duck, such as is used in making tents and wagon-covers.

Torn and whipped to ribbons though the stout fabric was, even a novice could not help seeing that it was nearly new. And as Boomer Balt still further unfolded it, a bit of splintered wood fell at his feet, to be caught up with a sharp exclamation of excited interest.

"What is it? What's the matter?" asked Hornkohl.

"Cipher it out fer yourself, man!" exclaimed the guide. "This is what's left of a wagon-kiver. That's part of a wagon-bow. Fresh broke, as ye kin see fer yourself. An' the twister brung 'em here an' wropped it to this stump, as a sign—as a sign to us, man!"

Boomer Balt was strangely excited. His face showed very pale beneath its coating of dust. His voice was hoarse and unnatural as he spoke, and his sinewy fingers trembled as they pointed first to the tattered duck and then to the splintered bow.

Quick-witted though he ordinarily was, Henry Hornkohl failed to catch the precise meaning of all this, and his puzzled mind showed in his face as he mechanically fingered the relics while staring into the countenance of his guide.

Boomer Balt frowned blackly for an instant as he saw this, but in another moment this vanished and he seemed once more the cool, iron-nerved veteran.

"A sign that somebody's bin ketched out in the storm, pard," he calmly explained. "Somebody with a kivered wagon. Mebbe that somebody is the ones you're huntin' fer. Mebbe—"

"And we wasting precious time here!" sharply interposed the lawyer, turning about and starting in the direction where their horses had been left when they set out to scale the hill. "Come on! We've got to follow up that sign, or—"

A heavy gust of wind, laden with great rain-drops, swept up the little valley with a force that staggered the man, choking off his excited speech, making him reel and cower.

In an instant Boomer Balt was by his side, grasping his arm and bracing him up, at the same time casting a quick, comprehensive glance around and above them. Just in time, for, catching the lawyer up in his strong arms, he plunged forward, barely escaping a heavy limb that fell splintered, point foremost, from a shattered tree overhanging them.

"Wait a bit, pardner," he panted, when a safer location was gained at the opposite side of the little valley. "This is the back-action of the twister, but it won't last long. It'll blow itself out in a few minnits, an' we'll make time by waitin' fer it to die away."

Henry Hornkohl shivered. Strong as his nerves were, they had been terribly tested during the past hour, and this last narrow escape from death unmanned him for the moment.

Side by side the two men crouched, exposed to the rain that was whirled about on the eddying wind. The might of the cyclone had left scant cover in its path, and, after their recent escape, open exposure was preferable to seeking any such shelter as remained.

In silence they used their eyes, noting the terrific devastation which the air-monster had wrought in those brief seconds of its hovering over the little valley.

Great trees were twisted short off. Others were left standing to their bushy tops, but with their trunks split into irregular ribbons, only

kept from falling in a mighty heap of kindling-wood by the still firm roots. Rocks that would weigh tons had been torn from their resting-places and tossed hither and yon. And yet, right where the wind had apparently spent its greatest fury, right in the center of a clump of trees which had been twisted off close to the ground and cast in all directions, stood a slender oak sapling, its leaves intact, its daintiest twigs unbroken. And between the main fork of this sapling, there shone a spider-web, perfect in all its delicate lines, with its bloated spinner lying in ambush for its prey.

"It ain't no bigger marvel then what come to us, pard," softly muttered Boomer Balt, with a quick glance upward that was almost reverential. "We was helpless as that spider when the big rock was lifted up, but it was carried over us, an' we still live."

"By the mercy of God!" murmured Hornkohl, bowing his head.

Neither of them felt much in the mood for idle converse as they waited for the first fury of the reflux to die away. Neither were men to wear their heart upon their sleeve, but each had been deeply impressed by what had passed. Each felt that he owed a life to a merciful Power. And each felt that silent thanks were more appropriate than open speech.

The fitful gusts were settling down into a steadier wind, and though the rain was falling almost in sheets, the two men could not wait longer before making a start. That tattered fragment of wagon-cover had strongly troubled them—was troubling them more and more with the passage of each minute.

What if the fear which Boomer Balt had partly given expression to should prove the truth? What if this fragment had come from the ones for whom they were seeking? What if it came as a mute but eloquent appeal for aid?

Fanciful? Far-fetched? Possibly so. And yet, after what had happened to them, few things could excite their wonder, few things be too marvelous for belief.

With heads bowed to the driving rain that laced their skins almost like the lash of a scourge the two men hurried down the little valley to where their horses had been left. A faint, tremulous neigh caused them to lift their heads, and a simultaneous cry of horrified amazement broke from their paling lips.

The horse left by Henry Hornkohl was standing where haltered, its ears pricked up and its head lifted as though glad to welcome them back; but the other animal?

A ghastly head was hanging by the stout trail-ropes, slowly swaying under the influence of the wind; but that was all.

The body was gone, leaving only a few blotches of blood to mark the spot. Gone—torn from the head, leaving the halter unbroken, the slender sapling unmarred in bark or twig. How? Who can explain it?

Almost stupidly the men gazed about, but without seeing aught of the missing trunk. It was gone—that was all they could say.

Yet the horse tied only a few feet distant had received no injury beyond a natural fright. And on the other side of that swinging head, a clump of wild roses still held their blooms, drenched with rain, but without a petal missing.

"Take your critter an' le's git out o' this!" hoarsely gasped Boomer Balt, his face showing white as that of a corpse through its mask of rain-drops.

With a last, shivering glance at the ghastly relic, he turned and staggered almost blindly down the valley.

Strong as were his nerves, this mad freak of the twister had temporarily unmanned him.

No less shaken, Henry Hornkohl managed to unfasten his horse, and without stopping to mount, hastened after his guide through the blinding rain. Their prime object, just then, was to get out of that valley.

A side defile enabled them to quickly accomplish this, and once on the comparatively level plain, both men drew long, free breaths once more. It was like leaving the valley of the shadow of death behind them!

"Ugh!" shivered Boomer Balt, shaking himself until a tiny shower of spray surrounded him. "Ef I ain't ha'nted by that head, I'll be the happiest man in seventeen counties this night! Durned ef it didn't look like it was grinnin' at me, fu'st glimpse! Yit people from down sun-ways laugh an' 'cuse us of lyin' when we talk over sech things."

"As I have done, but never will again," muttered Hornkohl, his voice far from being as clear and firm as usual. "After what I have witnessed this day, I know mortal lips cannot exaggerate or stretch the truth when talking of cyclones and their mad freaks."

"All the same, ef ever you tell o' this, folks 'll sw'ar you're tryin' to stuff 'em," growled Boomer Balt, pushing rapidly along through the heavily-falling rain.

Henry Hornkohl shrugged his shoulders as he swung himself painfully into the saddle. Just then he did not feel as though he could ever bring his lips to utter what he had gone through.

The first excitement was beginning to die away, and as the cold rain penetrated to his skin, sudden pains began to shoot through his

* It may be as well to state, right here, that this incident of the great boulder being torn from the earth and carried bodily through the air by a "twister" is a positive fact; and the same may be said concerning the other strange freaks recorded here.—J. E. B., Jr.

bones. Rheumatism of the most acute sort seemed to grasp him, to stiffen his limbs and render his flesh tender and sore to a degree that made every movement one of acute pain.

Boomer Balt turned hastily as he caught a groan from his comrade. His own face was haggard, and like that of a suffering man, though his movements seemed free enough; certainly they were active.

"You begin to feel it, eh?" he uttered, with a half-laugh and an involuntary grimace of pain. "Begin to feel like you was sent fer an' couldn't go?"

"I've heard of being—ugh!—run through a thrashing machine, but—grin on, you overgrown ape!" with sudden rage as Boomer Balt gave another grotesque grimace. "Keep it up, and I'll get down and crawl all over you!"

"It'd limber us both up, I reckon, an' that wouldn't be so mighty bad," retorted the guide, with a harsh laugh. "I kin feel fer ye, pard. I know jest how *you* feel, but I'm better off afoot then you be in the saddle. It's tortur' to keep trottin', but it won't let a critter stiffen up like ridin'. An' we've *got* to keep a-goin'!"

"Not if another cyclone was coming right this way!" desperately gasped Hornkohl, reining up, drooping helplessly in the saddle. "Not if stopping meant death—that would be heavenly bliss compared to what I'm— Oh, Lord!"

With an ejaculation that was fierce enough to be an oath, Boomer Balt sprang to his side, one hand grasping his arm with a force that drew a cry of pain from the lips of the lawyer.

"Stop here an' brand yourself a coward! Stop here and groan like a baby while your fellow beings are suffering for the aid you are too currish to lend them! Stop—bah!"

With a short, hard laugh of contempt, Boomer Balt flung away the arm he had grasped, and turning, he strode rapidly on in the track of the cyclone, his eyes roving swiftly from side to side, looking for what he hoped and prayed he might never find; yet what he knew he must find sooner or later.

That brief, passionate outburst aroused the lawyer, and after a moment's hesitation, he urged his horse on, springing to the ground as he reached the side of the tall guide. He smothered a groan of pain as the shock wrenched his aching joints, and his voice was almost harsh as Boomer Balt glanced into his white face.

"You talked to me as though I was a dog, Balthus Carr. I'll prove myself as good a man as you dare be! Only say what is wanted."

"To find whar that broken wagon-bow an' tattered kiver come from," was the grave response. "Whoever lost it, needs our help. If livin', to nuss 'em up. If dead, to dig 'em a grave."

"You're right—and I thank you for rousing me up, old fellow," frankly cried Hornkohl, grasping his hand, but dropping it again as if it scorched him. "Call it a shake, won't you?" with a faint laugh that was more to cover his own flinching than from any sense of mirth. "I'm sore as a boil all over!"

"It'll be wuss afore it's better," was the scant consolation as Boomer Balt strode on once more, his eyes still roving, still striving to pierce the driving sheets of rain and the gradually deepening gloom of evening. "That wind done it—or ruther the lack o' wind. But you know what I mean?"

Hornkohl nodded grimly. He recalled how they had been pressed to the earth until it seemed as though they would be flattened out like enormous pancakes, just before the cyclone struck the valley. He might have explained the curious phenomenon, but just then he felt little inclined that way. The results were more than enough.

With each step they took, the two men were given evidence of what tremendous power that whirling storm-cloud had contained. They could mark its progress by the bare earth, by the furrows dug in the hard ground as that terrible tongue had licked the surface.

With a less powerful impulse urging them on through the gathering gloom, the might have been interested in many a curious freak which now they passed by with hardly a glance.

Here they passed by a small clump of timber which the wind had torn into shreds, whirling the debris in every direction, leaving it strewn in a circle as regular as though marked out for a circus-ring, and not much larger in diameter.

There another patch of trees had been stripped of every leaf, but with hardly a limb broken.

Yonder a circle had been scooped out in the open ground, leaving a slender mound in the middle, on the top of which nodded a bunch of grass, with the seeds still on its tips, unharmed.

But there were other objects that possessed a far more terrible interest to their eyes. A bit of board, with staples which had recently held one end of a wagon-bow; a bit of tattered duck; a coat, filled as full of holes as though a score loads of buckshot had been fired through it; a battered tin cup; a wagon-wheel, with the hub gone, but every spoke in place and unbroken.

And then—a hoarse cry broke from the lips of Boomer Balt as he sprang rapidly forward and to one side of the terrible trail.

A shapeless mass lying on the bare ground,

Shapeless, yet with a fearful something in its appearance that blanched the cheeks of those strong men. Something that spoke of humanity—of death!

Henry Hornkohl was quickly at the side of his guide, but he involuntarily clasped both hands behind him as he gazed in awed silence at that dread object.

Once a man, strong, active, full of hope and joy and happiness. Now—a crushed and sickening mass of inanimate flesh. Shapeless, as it might well be, for as Boomer Balt touched it to turn the face upward, there seemed an utter absence of bones. The frightful power of the cyclone had shattered every bone, almost grinding them to powder, yet without hardly breaking the skin that covered them from human view!

One sock and a narrow collar-band about the neck was all that remained of its clothing. The hair was gone from its head, literally torn out without lacerating the scalp. There was no blood visible, and the exposed skin was almost white, save here and there where the red hue told of coagulated blood beneath.

Boomer Balt bent closely over the face, studying it closely as though to impress its details upon his brain, or else to smother a fear at his heart. Then he drew back, rising to his feet with a long breath as he muttered, in husky tones:

"God save his soul! It seems hard, but I'm prayin' glad it ain't either face I dreaded to see! Come—thar's more a-waitin' us!"

"But we can't—we can't leave like this!" gasped Hornkohl, hardly able to utter the words intelligibly. "We ought to bury it!"

"He's dead an' past knowin' what befalls his pore body. He's dead, but thar may be them livin' who needs our help," almost roughly cried the guide, grasping the lawyer by the arm and hurrying him away. "Mebbe they's them you've b'in huntin' fer. Mebbe they's wimmen an' children that wants the help we kin give 'em!"

Henry Hornkohl said no more. Indeed, he gave a sigh of relief as he hurried along the trail of the cyclone, leaving that ghastly corpse far behind.

Mechanically he noted the wide stretches over which the death-balloon had leaped without touching the earth at all. Noted other mad freaks through the deepening gloom. Noted them, only to have them fade away the instant they were passed. He kept pace with Boomer Balt, but it was almost mechanically. Almost like one walking in sleep.

It was a trying ordeal through which he had passed, and this grim discovery had proved the last feather. He took no note of time. He had no idea how far they had traveled, when another cry from Boomer Balt aroused him from that strange stupor.

It was night as he glanced around with a startled air. The rain was still falling, though the wind had almost entirely died away. All was dark about them—all save a dim, reddish glow far ahead of them.

"It's a camp-fire!" cried Boomer Balt, his voice hard and metallic. "They ain't all dead!"

Yet there was little of joy or of thankfulness in his tones. Instead, one would have said he was fearing the worst; that he was dreading to put fate to the test.

If so, this hesitation did not pass to his feet. He broke into a run, his long, swinging strides testing the powers of the lawyer to the utmost, in order to avoid being left far behind. And without pause or break the boomer guide raced on until he reached the tattered clump of timber in which the camp-fire was kindled.

He saw several white, haggard faces turned toward him, and cried:

"Is Evander Wright of this party, stranger?"

"They ain't none o' that name here," was the slow response.

"Thank God fer that!" panted Boomer Balt, sinking in a limp heap.

CHAPTER IV.

A MARVELOUS ESCAPE.

How long that desperate race for life had lasted, or how far it had carried them, before they were caught by the outer edge of the "twister," Oklahoma Nick could never clearly estimate. For the time being he had forgotten everything save that the life of the maiden whom he loved to madness was at stake.

And his first thought on arousing from the unconsciousness into which he had been hurled when horse and riders alike succumbed to that terrific blast, was of Otelia Wright; his second that he had been stricken with blindness in that one instant when he turned to see how near their doom was to them.

There was a smarting pain in his eyes as he struggled to lift his head, as he faintly, gaspingly called aloud the name of his loved one. All about him was black, and the frightful fear of blindness smote him.

He cowered back, clasping both hands to his aching orbs, a choking cry of horror escaping his laboring lungs. Better death than this! Better death, such as had overtaken—

His head was thrown back, his face upturned

in his misery, and the cold rain beat heavily upon him as a swirling current of wind drove the drops in a sheet before it. Instinctively he flinched, and mechanically brushed away the streaming drops—to utter a gasping cry of joyful amazement.

He was not blind! He could see, though dimly, painfully!

That darkness was mainly because the night was drawing near, for he had lain unconscious much longer than he had as yet realized. But the beating rain helped to wash the dirt and sand from his eyes, filled to overflowing as they had been when he turned to note the progress of the cyclone. He could see—and that horrible dread vanished as swiftly as it had assailed him.

"Telie! Telie Wright!" he cried hoarsely, staggering to his feet and staring painfully about him through the whirling sheets of rain.

He could see naught of the maiden. And as he staggered here and there, growing faint and sick, bodily as well as mentally, fear again assailed him, in a most tender point.

"Gone! my love—my life!"

His foot slipped in a pool of water, and he fell heavily, moaning and groaning, for the moment utterly unmanned.

Little marvel that such should be the case, though none but those who have had personal experience can fully comprehend why so strong a man should be broken down so completely in so brief a space.

But Oklahoma Nick was made of stern stuff, and quickly rallied. He found his flask still intact, and a drink of fiery brandy sent a thrill of life and energy through his veins. With a desperate effort he cast off the weakness that had assailed him, and staggered to his feet.

"Dead, if not alive!" he muttered, dashing the rain-drops from his face and shielding his eyes as he strove to pierce the obscurity with which he was surrounded. "What the wind has left is mine—mine!"

He was hardly conscious of the words that passed his lips, just then. He started at the sound of his own voice; but when he realized this fact, it helped to restore his usual nerve.

"Brace up—you've *got* to brace up, man!" he grated, clinching his hands tightly, setting his teeth, giving a half-defiant toss of his head. "She's alone, now, only for me! Only her and I—only we two!"

He shivered a little as he recalled his last glimpse of the two wagons with their terrified occupants, racing against death. He knew that they could not have cleared the center of the twister. Knew that they must have been overtaken and swept out of existence. For human strength or ingenuity could avail nothing in such an extremity.

He knew this from his own experience, though he had been caught by the extreme edge of the circling monster. Only the fringe of the storm, yet it had hurled man and horse about like a feather-weight. Had cast him senseless. What had it done with the horse? With Otelia Wright?

What with his injured eyesight, with the coming of night, the beating rain and the vicious eddying winds, it was little better than a blind search on the part of Oklahoma Nick for a time. But his dizzy brain was rapidly growing more steady. The rain that streamed over his face helped to clear his eyes of extraneous matter, even more than it hindered his anxious glances. And the darkness seemed to lessen as the wind lowered, as the rain fell in steadier fashion, no longer swirling about like spray from storm-swept waves on a rocky coast.

And then—a choking cry escaped his lips as he plunged forward and dropped on his knees beside a motionless figure, only a few yards from where he had regained his consciousness, and past which he had more than once staggered in his blind quest.

"Telie! my love!" he panted, scarce daring to touch that silent shape with his trembling hands. "Telie! it is over—you are safe—rouse up, darling!"

Was it a response? Did she stir in answer to his appeal? She could not say for sure, but the hope lent him courage to lift her head to his bosom, to peer down into that pale, storm-marked face.

With gentle force he parted the clinched teeth and let brandy slowly trickle into her mouth, changing the position of her head a little to facilitate swallowing. And then a glad sound rose in his throat, as he felt her move, as he saw her eyes faintly open.

Only for an instant, but long enough to assure him that there was life lingering in the woman whom he loved so ardently; and that discovery completed his recovery. Feeling how much depended upon him, Oklahoma Nick grew cool and steady-nerved.

With his own form he sheltered the maiden as much as possible from the rain, though he knew she was already wet to the skin. He held her in as easy a position as he could improvise while applying brandy to her face, gently rubbing her cheeks and temples to hasten the circulation. Drop after drop of the potent liquor he let fall through her lips, a gentle movement of the arm which supported her head aiding the brandy to steal its way down her throat. And then, as a

faint sigh came from the maiden's lips; as her eyes again opened, this time gazing bewilderedly into his face as it hung, dimly outlined, above her; as she mechanically sought to arise; a glad, almost prayerful cry escaped him.

"It is over, 'Telie, and you are safe—safe and sound—but are you?" interrupting himself, with a new-born fear of broken bones and internal injuries. "You are all right? You are not badly hurt, little girl?"

At first it was clear that the maiden did not realize what had happened, or where she was. She stared blankly into the shadowy face above her, making no effort to return or resist the almost passionate clasp of the young guide's arms. But then a low, troubled cry escaped her lips, and she drew back, feebly striving to spring to her feet.

"Let me go—how dare you—I am not—Merciful heavens!" with a wail of bitter anguish as a part of the terrible truth seemed to flash across her whirling brain. "Father! mother! brother!"

She clasped both hands over her eyes, as though to shut out some frightful vision, bowing her head and sobbing piteously.

Without a word Oklahoma Nick had permitted her to slip from his arms as she made the effort, and now, still on his knees, he watched her give way to her hysterical grief, his hands tightly clasped behind his back like one fighting against temptation.

Only for a moment. However keenly this shrinking back must have cut him, loving Otelia Wright as he did, he felt that this was no time to stand on ceremony.

With gentle force he took the sobbing girl in his arms, again bending his broad shoulders to shield her from the pelting rain. He only held her the more firmly as she struggled to break away, and his voice was gravely hard as he spoke:

"Weep if you must, 'Telie. Let the tears flow until the fount runs dry; but try to remember that every minute spent in weeping is one minute lost. Still, weep on: it will do you good. If nothing else, it will clear your brain until you can see how unjust you are in shrinking from the man who alone can aid you in this extremity—and what do you shrink away for?" with an angry pang which for the moment overmastered him. "Because I love you? Because you are more than all the world to me? More than heaven itself, a thousand times over!"

Passionate as was this outburst, the half-crazed girl did not seem to hear him. With her bowed head buried in her hands, she swayed back and forth, sobbing until her lithe frame was shaken as a reed.

She thought of her loved ones as she had last seen them. Thought of them vainly striving to flee from that frightful doom. Pictured them caught in the grasp of the wind demon, torn—

"Dead—all dead!" she moaned, shiveringly. "Dead—and I not with them! You tore me away, Nicholas Van Bibber!" she cried, her voice harsh and unnatural as she suddenly turned to confront the guide, her great eyes seeming to send forth light through the misty gloom. "You dared to tear me away from them—and they are dead—dead!"

"Maybe not so bad, 'Telie," muttered Oklahoma Nick, his dark eyes meeting hers firmly, striving to conquer her with a magnetic power. "We were threatened with the same peril, yet we are both living. Try to think that the same kind Providence may have shielded them."

A brighter light came into his eyes as he saw that his mental effort was not entirely without effect. Her eyes lost something of their fierce, half-crazed light, and wavered before his steady gaze. Her rigid muscles began to relax, to quiver, and her breath to come in short, quick, unsteady pants.

He strove to throw more power into his gaze, and his arms tightened about her form as he added:

"There was no time to waste, and I acted for what I thought the best. That I was not far wrong is proved by your being still alive."

"And they—father, mother, brother—dead!"

"I hope not—I even believe they are still alive, safe and unhurt," steadily uttered Oklahoma Nick, though he felt that each word he pronounced then was false. "I believe you will be reunited, to forget this scare. And then—when your poor brain grows calm and you can see how bitterly unjust you have been toward me, whose sole thought was how to the most surely save your dear life—may you see then how intensely I love you, to meekly bear your upbraidings!"

It was hardly a generous speech, but he who uttered it was madly in love, and all unused to holding his hot passions in check. Still, he could hardly have selected words better calculated to restore Otelia Wright to at least a semblance of her usual composure.

With a sudden effort she freed herself from his embrace, and rose unsteadily to her feet. Her brain reeled, and a red light seemed to dance before her eyes, but she bravely conquered this, steadying both herself and her voice as Oklahoma Nick sprang erect before her.

"If I owe you thanks, Mr. Van Bibber, I will try to pay them; but not now—not until I have

learned the fate of my family! If they are safe, I will go down on my knees to you in—"

"Not that, 'Telie," was his swift interposition, as he caught the white hand that waved him back, almost crushing it in his strong fingers, so great was his emotion. "There is a way you can thank me, but not in words—not in empty phrases! Say that you will give me the one sweet reward that I hope and pray for! Say that you will—"

"You are hurting me, sir!" sharply cried the maiden, shrinking from the guide as she spoke; but it was not solely of her poor fingers she was thinking then, and right well Oklahoma Nick realized this fact.

He dropped her hand, almost flung it from him. He turned on his heel with an oath grating through his clinched teeth. Just then he could have welcomed the return of the cyclone, for he felt that death itself could not be half as bitter as this repulse.

It was not the first one he had suffered, since that journey began, but it cut him more deeply than all the rest combined. He had but just saved her from a terrible death. He believed that only for his prompt and decided action, she would be a corpse, torn and mangled, crushed out of all semblance to humanity by the awful winds. To him she owed her life. He asked for her love in repayment, and she repulsed him. He begged for love, and she gave him scorn!

As these thoughts flashed through his excited brain, his love was turned to hatred even more intense. Explain it how you will: I only record the plain truth.

But it did not last long. As she saw him stride away, Otelia uttered a pitiful cry that instantly checked his steps, and wheeling about he saw her hastening unsteadily after him, with with outstretched hands.

After all, she was but a weak woman, with her brain half-crazed by all she had undergone during the past few hours. She believed she had driven him away by her cold words, and she dare not be left alone in the dark, stormy night—alone in the wilderness where all her loved ones had met death in such hideous shape! It would drive her mad!

"Do not leave me, Mr. Van Bibber!" she gasped, faintly, as Oklahoma Nick sprang back to her side, his strong arm again about her waist. "In the name of kind Heaven, do not desert me now! Take me to them—take me to my poor—poor—"

Her voice choked, and she sunk a heavy weight upon his arm, shivering faintly, barely conscious. She was conscious, and yet she made no resistance to his close embrace, to his hot kisses with which he covered her cold, damp face. And in that moment Oklahoma Nick felt repaid for all he had done, all he had endured. Felt that the victory was well-nigh won, despite the heavy odds which he had foreseen from the very outset.

Yet, bold wooer though he had proved himself, he dared not press his advantage too far, just at first. During the past few months, he had learned a good deal about feminine nature of which he had been blissfully ignorant until then. Seemingly lifeless though the girl was, he knew that she was still conscious. He knew that, despite her utter misery, she could never wholly forget those passionate kisses; knew that whenever she recalled them, the bond between them would tighten and grow less easy to break.

It was hard to refrain, his love was so passionate, but he proved equal to the occasion. He was playing for the heaviest stake of his life, and this knowledge stood him in good stead now.

His strong arms encircled her shivering form, but she no longer felt the touch of his lips. Shielding her from the cold rain as best he could, Oklahoma Nick spoke rapidly, tenderly, soothingly.

He bade her hope for the best. He said that, after their own almost miraculous escape from death, they might well believe their loved ones had also been spared. He declared that a faith within him told him as much; a faith that was more powerful than all the reasoning he could bring forward to convince her. And something of this faith—not pretended, as in his own case—his words imparted to the poor girl, who begged him to begin the search at once.

"If living, they are suffering worse than death on my account!"

"I dare not leave you alone, 'Telie," was his soft response, "and you are not strong enough to begin such a weary, aimless search as this may prove. If I only had my good old horse!"

"They must be near—they were coming in the same direction with us, you remember," faltered the girl.

A short, uneasy laugh broke from the guide, as he cast a rapid look around and above them.

"If we could only be sure what direction that was, my poor child!" he uttered, with chilling graveness.

Shocked and bewildered though Otelia was, she did not require an explanation of these words. It was night. The heavens above were covered over with dense clouds through which not even a solitary star was permitted to show its light. The wind had died away, and the

rain was falling steadily, straight down from the clouds above. There was nothing to tell them the points of the compass. Nothing to guide them in the right course.

"You understand, 'Telie," gravely added Oklahoma Nick, after a silence long enough to permit the chilling facts to impress themselves on her mind. "If I was alone, or you had a horse to ride, something might be done. It would be aimless wandering, perhaps, but chance might lead us to them, even as it might cause us to circle about all night, to find ourselves within a score rods of where we started when day brought light to guide us."

"I am strong—I can stand it," uttered Otelia, with a pitiful effort to steady her voice. "Anything is better than staying here in idleness, while they may be—God pity us all!"

She broke down again, sobbing painfully, but she shrunk away from the support which Oklahoma Nick would have lent her.

"Find them—bring us together, dead or living!" she cried, with hysterical vehemence, flinging back her loosened hair, her temples clasped with both hands, her eyes shining with a phosphorescent light as she stood before him thus. "Find them—and if dead, I'll curse you with my last breath for tearing me from them in their peril! Go, if you are even the shadow of a man! Go—and never return until you can bring me tidings of my dear ones!"

Oklahoma Nick caught her in his strong arms, holding her captive despite her desperate struggles to break away. He felt that she was on the point of going mad with grief and anxiety, and he dared not leave her thus. Instead, he spoke quietly, calmly, seeking to quiet and steady her nerves. And as her struggles grew less and less: as she at length submitted to his greater strength, he thought to still further improve the coveted advantage he fancied he had won.

He went over the old ground, showing how all his actions had been shaped by his passionate love for her, while at the same time showing how impossible it was for him to have aided the rest of the family further than he had done by telling them the safest direction to take in the forlorn hope of eluding the twister.

"If I could aid them in the slightest, 'Telie, nothing would keep me from so doing; nothing but leaving you here alone in this terrible darkness, to go mad long before I could find you again! Not even your anger and scorn can drive me from your side now, little one; and how cruelly bitter they are, may you never come to know through your own feelings! More bitter than death! For I love you—I love you so madly, my darling!"

As he uttered the closing words, he pressed his lips to hers; but it was a rash move on his part. With a sharp, angry cry, Otelia wrested herself free, standing erect, one hand motioning him back as she cried:

"Love! You dare to talk of love—now, and to me?"

"Why not, since it is love I feel for you, 'Telie?"

"Not that name—not the name he used to call me!" she gasped, almost choking, her other hand rising to her swelling throat.

"Otelia—Miss Wright—"

Like a dim phantom her white hand waved before his face, cutting his agitated speech short. And then, cold and hard, came her voice:

"You force me to utter words which are almost as hard for me to utter as you to hear, Mr. Van Bibber. You speak of love, when you know that I have no love to give you in return. Is this kind—is it the part of a man, helpless, miserable wretch as I am now, not knowing but what all I had to love and care for on earth are dead or dying? And I away—torn from their side by your cruel hands!"

"Love? I hate you, Nicholas Van Bibber!" with fierce earnestness, as she drew still further away, looking like some dim, shadowy phantom of the stormy night through the intervening gloom.

Whatever answer Oklahoma Nick might have made to this unexpected outburst, was cut short by a sound that came quivering through their ears; the sound of a far-away human voice—a voice pronouncing the name of the poor girl who stood spellbound with clasped hands, scarce breathing lest it drown that joyful sound!

Then, clear and piercing, soaring through the night as though carried on wings, rung out her response:

"Brother! Perry! Here—oh, here!"

A few moments of terrible suspense which was felt by both man and maiden, then back floated the glad sounds:

"Comin'—I'm comin', 'Telie!"

With a gasping sob, the poor girl sunk to the ground, a hand clasped over her wildly throbbing heart. It was the voice of that young giant, her brother Pericles! Alive! Coming! And the others? Her father and mother? What of them? Had they also escaped that storm demon? Were they alive, waiting and watching and praying for their child? Or—

She would not, she dared not think of that dread alternative.

She shivered as Oklahoma Nick lifted up his strong voice in a prolonged shout. What if there came no answer? What if it had been but a dream—a phantom of a shattered brain!

But no! Again came that glad cry, clearer and more distinct, and as she uncovered her eyes and peered through the night, she caught sight of a faint, twinkling light, bobbing up and down as it came nearer and nearer. It was no will-o'-the-wisp! It was a lantern, and the hand of her dear, great, clumsy twin brother held it!

With a sobbing cry that seemed enough to strangle her, Otelia sprang to her feet and darted forward, keeping her eyes on that light. And only for the quick grasp of the guide's hand as she stumbled, she must have come to grief with almost her first step.

Thus supported, though she seemed ignorant of the fact, Otelia ran on, laughing, crying, hope and fear strangely mingled.

Oklahoma Nick could understand her emotions, and as they drew a little nearer the light, he cried out clearly:

"Your sister is well. How is it with you all?"

"Safe an' sound, through the mercy o' God!" came the deep-toned response, as the light rushed toward them with still greater rapidity.

"You see, my faith did not fail us," muttered Oklahoma Nick. "I knew that all would prove well with them, though you—"

But Otelia had broken away from him, and darting forward with marvelous swiftness, sprang into the arms of her twin brother, sobbing on his neck, covering his bearded face with kisses, fairly wild with joy.

Brother though it was, Oklahoma Nick frowned darkly as he picked up the lantern which Pericles had dropped to embrace Otelia, and it was quite as much to cut short this affectionate scene as to learn what had happened that he questioned the young giant. And as he moved forward on the plain trail of the new-comer with the lantern, naturally enough they followed after without delay.

There was much to tell, though the important points can be briefly summed up for our purpose.

The escape of the Wright family was quite as strange and happy as those which have already been placed on record; yet, like them, true and unvarnished facts.

Despite the frantic racing of their good horses, they could not clear the course of the twister. And only for one of those mighty leaps which the death-balloon so often takes, death must have been their portion.

As it was, the cyclone leaped over them, without so much as shaking a fold of the wagon-covers, striking the plain beyond, to tear out a pit large enough to bury a score of wagons in!

The mad roaring of the winds as they whirled over, frightened the horses so that they stopped short in their tracks; two of them dropped down as though smitten with death, but this was through fright alone.

As the peril was past, though all knew that a heavy storm was almost sure to follow the twister, the course in which the doubly-laden horse had vanished was marked out, and speedy pursuit would have been given, only for the reflux winds, which kept the two men busy fighting for their property as well as their lives. And, somehow, the proper line was lost, and since early dark Perry had been vainly searching for them.

"It's ended now, though!" he cried, with a cheery laugh, as he pointed out a red light which suddenly came into view some distance off. "That's the fire father promised to keep burning. The timber has hidden it until now, I reckon."

He spoke truly; and, hand in hand, the twins ran along, eager to join their parents, whom one of the twain had despaired of ever meeting again in this lower world. And with them ran Oklahoma Nick, bearing the lantern, for if he did not feel quite so overjoyed at the outcome, he was far too wise to let his feelings appear on the surface just then.

Of the meeting—what? Only that it is not for idle description.

It was like a resurrection: from death to life, peace and content.

CHAPTER V.

A WAIF OF THE STORM.

NOTWITHSTANDING their almost miraculous escape from what had looked like certain death, the Wright family had not come through the storm entirely unscathed.

The cyclone proper had leaped over them without doing the slightest damage, but in the wild reflux of winds, one of the wagons was overturned and its contents somewhat demoralized.

Fortunately this did not happen until its living contents were safely on foot, looking after the frightened horses, freeing them from the traces and guarding against the mad flight which almost certainly follows such spells of paralyzing terror.

Some broken bows, a torn cover, a few frail articles demolished and the rest damaged to a greater or less degree by water, was the sum total of the damage. But had it been a thousandfold as great, it could not have brought a

cloud to their brows, a regret to their lips in that hour of joyful reunion.

How joyful, only those who have passed through a like separation can even begin to conceive.

"There was only one earthly hope left, 'Telia," murmured the mother, a slight, delicate-looking woman who showed her years far more plainly than her sturdy helmsmate. "It looked as though you might outrun the storm, and even when our peril looked blackest, I was praying for that!"

"I'll never forgive him—never!" shivered Otelia, with a quick glance toward Oklahoma Nick, who was freshening the fire. "I feared him then, I hate him now!"

"'Telia—he saved your life!" murmured Mrs. Wright, one thin hand slipping over the paling lips of her child as she glanced apprehensively toward the guide.

"I would have been safer with you. And even if not," with a flash in her great blue eyes that even tears could not entirely dim, "what right had he to drag me away from your side against my will?"

"He thought it was the only hope, 'Telia. He thought—as we all believed—that death was certain, here. He could only save one; and who should that be but the one whom he loved, whom he hoped to make his wife?"

Though so softly speaking, almost timidly, like one who dreads being overheard by other ears, Mrs. Wright was clearly in earnest as she pleaded the cause of Oklahoma Nick. It was plain enough that the dashing young guide had one staunch friend in camp, if no more.

Otelia knew this, and her face grew a little paler, a little graver, and even stern as she cast a brief glance toward the fire; to see Oklahoma Nick watching her, even while listening to Evander Wright as the excited boomer talked of their marvelous escape.

A little shiver shook her lithe figure as there flashed across her memory part of what had happened out yonder on the rain-drenched plain; the impetuous words of love—the passionate kisses with which Nicholas Van Bibber had covered her face as she lay helpless in his arms. And a hot flush colored her cheeks as she remembered how piteously she had called him back, begging him not to desert her there in that horrible gloom.

She must have been mad! She feared him, though she could not have told just why; had feared him almost from their first meeting, long years ago, when she was but little more than a child in age, though even then a woman in experience. Now—as her memory freshened and grew more distinct—she hated him!

"Mother," she uttered, her tones strangely harsh as she whispered the words. "Mother, if he had saved my life, and the rest of you had lost yours; if we had been separated through his action; I would have killed him like a dog!"

Hardly, almost viciously the words came, but with them vanished the feverish strength of the over-trying girl. She buried her face in the bosom of her mother, and their tears were mingled.

Oklahoma Nick took a step toward them as he saw this, but Evander Wright quickly checked him, shrewdly muttering:

"We ain't wanted thar, lad. Let 'em cry it out; it's true wimmen's medicine, an' wuth more'n a hull drug-store or a camp-meetin'. Stop 'em from cryin', after all they've b'in through, an'—they'd bust!"

The result seemed to justify the boomer's prediction, for after a few minutes of convulsive sobbing, Otelia gradually grew more calm and like her natural self.

Of them all, Oklahoma Nick seemed the least at ease. The others, if they were still nervous and given to starting at the slightest sound from the night, and to watching the black space above them as if fearing the return of that frightful wind-scurge, were at least thankful for their miraculous preservation, and happy in being once more together. But the guide apparently forgot all this as he saw how persistently Otelia refused to be left alone with him, even for a moment.

There was one little incident of a rather curious nature which broke in upon the interchange of experience after the first transports of reunion were over. A low, whimpering neigh startled the little company, and as Oklahoma Nick sprang to his feet with a sharp ejaculation, a saddled and bridled horse entered the circle of firelight.

It was none other than the animal from whose back Nick and Otelia had been brushed by the whirling wing of the cyclone.

"Rumpled up a little," chuckled Evander Wright as he slowly examined the creature and its trappings. "Them'll need a little patchin' an' a buckle or two, an' he'll want time to grow out a bit o' hair or so; but they ain't nothin' to cry over, as I kin see!"

"God has been very merciful to us all," chokingly murmured Mrs. Wright.

If lips were silent, more than one heart echoed her words.

Somehow the safe return of this creature appeared to lift the last weight from the spirits of the Boomers, and the improvement was so marked that Evander Wright could not help speaking of it.

"It's only a hoss, some'd say," he laughed, half-abashed yet wholly in earnest, "an' that's true enough, fur's it goes. Only a hoss; but while it was gone, they was one link missin', while now the hull thing looks complete. Here's every livin' thing they was with us when the cyclone fust showed up. It looked mighty dubious fer us all, but we've pulled through all right; an' somethin' tells me we'll git to the happy end jest as safe an' sound!"

It was much later than their customary hour for eating supper, and now that the first transports were dying down to sober content, the rugged, healthy boomers began to think about creature comforts.

"It's wet an' sloppy enough, but whar's a fire thar's cookin' kin be did, I reckon," laughingly called out Evander Wright; and this had the desired effect, Mrs. Wright putting Otelia aside and bustling about after her usual fashion when meal-time drew nigh.

Oklahoma Nick tried to take advantage of this division, but as though she divined his purpose, Otelia at once sought the side of her great twin brother, making pretense of helping him raise the little tent in which, as a rule, the two women slept at night. And once more the love-lorn guide fell back, baffled, discontented.

The rain was still falling, and apparently would last for some time, if not all night, though here and there a star might have been seen peeping for an instant through a tiny rift in the clouds above the camp. Everything was pretty thoroughly soaked, as the wagon which had suffered most from the returning winds was the one which contained the every-day necessities: the tent, sleeping apartments and cooking utensils. But Perry Wright declared that he was afraid of catching cold if he was forced to eat supper in the open air, and Otelia was only too willing to humor his threadbare joke by lending him company.

As Oklahoma Nick fell back, frowning, he gave a sudden start and dropped a hand to the weapons at his waist, peering keenly through the gloom which fell around the firelit circle.

"Don't shoot, stranger! It's on'y me!" came a quavering, husky voice from out of the darkness.

"Who 're you, and what's you're business here?" sharply cried the guide, a cocked revolver aimed by sound rather than sight. "Show your colors in a hurry, and say your prayers if they ain't the right sort!"

"Let me come in the light, stranger," came that peculiar, shivering voice again, if possible sounding more doleful than at first. "They ain't nobody but me—an' I couldn't hurt a sick kitten jes' now, I'm so e-tarnally done up! Don't shoot—it'd be wuss then murder!"

As he spoke, the fellow advanced until he stood just within the circle of firelight, shrinking, shivering, one shoulder lifted to partially guard his forlorn-looking head. And over that trembling guard came the half-ludicrous, half-pitiful words:

"Does I look so mighty dangerous, stranger? Does I look so awful wolfish that ye're skeered to give me jes' a whiff o' heat an' light?"

"A mighty little rattler can make it precious hot for the biggest man, stranger," slowly uttered the guide, but lowering his revolver as he turned to glance at his employers, if so the Wright's might be called.

There were no signs of the dreaded "blue-coat" in this wretched shape, and that was enough for Evander Wright.

"Come in, stranger," he cried cordially, one hand dropping on the guide's revolver, pushing it still further aside. "You're more'n welcome to what we've got; it ain't this night of all nights that we ought to keep the latch-string pulled in!"

"That's white—white an' hearty, stranger," muttered the waif of the storm, in a more lively tone as he shuffled forward and bent over the crackling fire, almost thrusting his hairy hands into the leaping flames. "Lord knows I feel the need o' some sech welkin! Lord knows I've gone through enough this day to—*you* see'd it? *You* see'd that devil thing bouncin' an' howlin' an' twistin' through the air?"

"And only escaped death by the mercy of high Heaven, sir," was the grave, almost reverent response.

"You was in luck—monstrous big luck!" mumbled the stranger, as he cast a swift, furtive glance around the place, seeming to take in every detail. "That is," his tones suddenly altering as he looked up into the grave face of the boomer, "ef you was the party we follered to-day ontel that twister hit us?"

Oklahoma Nick had been keenly watching the man, as though still suspicious, and now interposed, his voice hard and almost menacing:

"So you admit being one of that gang? What were you watching and dogging us for? You kept out of rifle-range to-day, but you're near enough for a center-shot just now."

The storm-waif stared at the handsome speaker with wide-open eyes, apparently too much amazed to feel fear at first. Evander Wright saw this, and his faintest doubts were dispelled. This was not one whom they had cause to fear, certainly.

"Leave him to me, lad," he muttered softly,

drawing the guide back a trifle as he spoke. "You're skeerin' what little wits he's got left right out o' the pore, shakky critter."

The words were not intended for the ears of the stranger, but a faint smile wrinkled his dirt-streaked face, and the next words he uttered told that nothing was the matter with his sense of hearing, at all events.

"He don't look like sech a 'stravagant man, stranger, to waste a good ca'tridge on mighty pore game es I be. Not that I'd keer so awful much!" with sudden bitterness, as he held out his shivering hands and glanced downward over his person. "I ain't got so turrible much to lose, hev I, now?"

No one contradicted him, for to do so would be lying brazenly. A more wretched-looking creature never stood up in full health and strength.

Though thin, gaunt, stoop-shouldered and hollow-chested, the fellow seemed healthy enough, but that was all one could say in his favor. He shivered like one afflicted with St. Vitus's dance. He seemed utterly broken-spirited by what he had undergone that day.

His clothes hung about him, a mass of rags, scarce sufficient to cover his nakedness. His head was bare, save for the long, snake-like locks of coarse black hair that hung dripping from the rain. His dark, parchment-like skin was streaked with scratches and marked with scars both new and old. One foot was bare, and the leg of the boot on his right foot was split from top to instep, the edges showing fresh in the red light of the camp-fire.

All in all, a more dilapidated wretch could hardly have been found in all the Nation that night.

"A purty pictur', ain't I?" with a sickly grin, as he slowly turned himself about to give them a complete and comprehensive view of himself. "But it's all they is left o' Jerry Viggles. Jest a shell. What heart an' courage an' grit he hed went out when the boys was tuck."

Husky, barely articulate the words, and the shivering wretch dropped down in a heap beside the fire, moaning like a dog in a troubled sleep.

Oklahoma Nick showed some signs of pressing him with closer queries, but kind-hearted Evanda Wright checked him.

"Let the pore critter rest, lad. It's plain enough what he's gone through, an' we can guess at how hard it cuts him."

"I only wanted to make sure that he meant no harm in dogging us as he and his party did to-day," muttered the guide, his brows still corrugated, his air still that of one ill at ease.

Still, he yielded, as in duty bound, for although he accepted no pay for acting as guide for the party, and was thus given more freedom of action, Evander Wright was the head of the little company.

In company with Perry Wright, Oklahoma Nick picketed out the animals where they might gain some little picking during the early part of the night, for they had to depend on natural food during their long journey. And the young men interchanged congratulations as they saw how rapidly the clouds were breaking away above.

"It was awful while it lasted, but it left us safe and unharmed," said the guide. "It has gone, and we can count on a week of good weather at least."

Perry nodded assent. He understood the allusion, and placed implicit reliance in what had given it birth.

If not a positive fact, it is still a curious coincidence that every "twister" of note in the West has been followed on the seventh day by a heavy storm from the quarter toward which the cyclone blew, heavy enough almost to be called a hurricane, but blowing straight forward, without the frightfully destructive circles of the "twister."

Together the two young men returned to the camp, finding Jerry Viggles looking wonderfully improved in physical bearing, as he lovingly hugged a tin cup of steaming coffee.

And before the supper was half over, the waif of the storm was bustling about busy as a flea, laughingly declaring that the only way in which he could pay for his supper was by waiting on the kind ladies. And as this seemed to give the poor wretch a certain degree of pleasure, no one objected; and kind-hearted Evander Wright called for much more coffee than he was in the habit of drinking, purely from pleasure at giving pleasure.

Then, while the women were clearing away the supper things and preparing the tent for the night, the men squatted about the cheery fire, smoking and talking.

"You were one of the fellows we saw dogging us, then?" abruptly asked Oklahoma Nick, as he saw that Evander Wright made no move toward settling that uneasy question.

A sickly smile stole into the face of the storm-waif, and he nodded assent, pulling a little more rapidly at his pipe perhaps, but giving no other sign of uneasiness.

"Reckon we was," he muttered, between puffs. "Ain't much harm in that, was they?"

"That depends on what you hoped to gain by it."

"An' we got heap more'n what we hoped fer, too," with a shiver as he cast a nervous glance over his shoulder at the gloom behind the fire-circle.

"What's become o' them as was with you?" interposed Evander Wright.

Jerry Viggles drooped his head with a hollow moan, shaking from head to foot like a shrub shivering in a whirlwind.

"Gone! Licked up like a fire licks up grass!" he huskily muttered. "Three as good boys as ever drawed the breath o' life—wiped out in a breath—tuck up an'—ugh!"

Even Oklahoma Nick seemed awed into silence as the storm-waif crouched before them, his face hidden in his trembling hands. Only for a moment. Then, with a sudden start and shake, Jerry Viggles lifted his head and glanced quickly from face to face, a ghastly smile upon his own features. And his voice was more natural as he spoke:

"They're gone—good pards as ever mortal man could hev or wish for—but mebbe they're the gainers, after all! Anyway, it was a higher will then ours that called 'em, an' I'm a fool to give way like this. It was so ordered, I reckon."

There was an echo of fatalism in his tones as he picked up a fresh coal to drop into the bowl of his pipe.

"How long had you been following us?"

"We hit the trail last night, an' tuck to it with the fu'st gleam o' day, ridin' pritty peert ontel we sighted your wagon-kivers. Then, fer fear you mought try to give us the slip, we hung back, jest keepin' nigh enough to ketch a glimpse now an' then as you riz a hill, like."

"What were you following us for?" persisted Oklahoma Nick.

"Waal, you see, it's like this," slowly responded Jerry Viggles, stretching out his left hand and marking something like a rude map on its palm with the stem of his pipe. "We was in a mighty bad way up thar in Kansas. Try how we mought, we couldn't git no sort o' headway on, an' so—waal, we 'lowed we'd try what var'tue they was in all this blowin' 'bout Oklahoma."

"We wasn't rigged out to jine one o' them colonies, even ef the idee'd suited us, which it didn't by a heap. They git stopped too sudden, ye see. They're so big that Uncle Sam's boys can't help but run up ag'inst 'em. An' then we meant pure business, not empty bluff. We wanted to *git thar*, not to lay dawdlin' 'long the trail, drawin' grain an' fodder from them that *did* work. An' so—waal, we struck out on a bee-line, nigh's we could figger it out in our own heads, 'lowin' to keep shady, to ketch our own grub, an' mebbe git thar in good time. We 'lowed to pick out a good claim each, an' hold on to it the best we mought, ontel things sorter simmered down, like."

"An' so—waal, we hit your trail, an' knowed from the sign that you was runnin' a straight ticket; that you was white, an' lookin' fer what you hed a mighty good idee whar to find it, or you wouldn't be so fur from the big gang, nur makin' sech a straight trail—see?"

The explanation was reasonable enough, though it might easily have been couched in plainer words.

"We took you for scouts in search for stragglers, and that is why we ran right into the cyclone."

"An' we didn't know no better then to foller ye right slap into the wu'st of it!" with a groan of sorrowful disgust. An' we was so skeered you'd slip us in the dark, an' we'd lose the trail in the rain that was comin', we hurried on foot without thinkin' o' trouble or danger from overhead, when—waal, that's 'bout all I know," with a nervous shiver, his voice growing husky and indistinct. "The wind come down an' twisted me out o' the saddle. 'Peared like it was tearin' me in ten thousan' bits, an' liftin' every one of 'em up to the stars!"

"And your mates?" asked Evander Wright.

Jerry Viggles shook his head gloomily.

"I'll never tell ye!"

Rough, ignorant, uncouth though he was, he seemed to suffer so much from merely recalling those terrific moments, that not one of those who watched him had the heart to question him further.

From what they had witnessed and endured themselves, they could partly imagine the tragedy.

By this time the clouds had broken up and the stars were shining with unusual distinctness, though the moon was still hidden behind a bank of clouds. The air was clear and cool, as though purified by the terrible tempest which had so recently swept over that section.

Although their emotions had been so strongly stirred the party began to show signs of sleepiness, and before long the little circle about the camp fire was broken up.

Otelia and her mother had sometime since retired to their cots in the little tent, after bidding the rest good-night. And as it was the turn of Oklahoma Nick to stand guard, as well as his duty, he bade Evander and Pericles roll themselves up and sleep while they could.

"If anything unusual should happen, be sure I'll rout you out," he lightly added, as he ex-

amined his Winchester, and made sure it had suffered no harm in the storm.

Jerry Viggles volunteered to keep the guide company during his watch, but as his jaws were widely gaping while waiting for a reply, his offer was declined. And hardly waiting to wrap the blanket around him which Evander Wright produced for his comfort, the waif of the storm curled up near the fire and lay snoring quietly.

Unlike the rest, Oklahoma Nick showed no signs of sleepiness for the time being. His brain was far too busy for that; he had too much food for thought; too much to keep him widely awake.

And as he paced slowly to and fro near the still grazing horses, or stood in silence leaning on the muzzle of his rifle, staring at vacancy, the handsome young guide gave himself up to these thoughts.

They concerned Otelia Wright, her past, the present, and the future of them both.

"Not 'Telie, because he used to call her by that name!" he grated through his clinched teeth, his dark eyes glowing redly. "Will she never forget him? Must he ever stand in my way? Ay!" with vicious emphasis as he started along his beat again. "Until he pays the penalty of his crime on the scaffold!"

And for days and weeks he had been flattering himself that he was surely if slowly winning his way to the glorious mark on which he had set his eyes: the love of fair Otelia Wright! He felt that she was learning to love him, even as he loved her.

Until this night—until she cried out that she hated him! And for what? Because he tried to save her life, at the risk of his own!

Alone, he could easily have ridden beyond reach of the dread cyclone; but he had doubly weighted his good horse, and barely escaped death in consequence. And this was his sole reward!

And yet—did the poor girl really comprehend what she uttered? She was driven half-mad through fear for her parents and brother. She felt that he was to blame for thus separating her from them. And when she had time to think it all over—when she was cool-nerved and clear-brained again—would it not be different? It would, it must!

"I love her so dearly! And I have both father and mother on my side," he reflected, more hopefully; was it because he was growing sleepy that the hard facts grew softer, the keen points blunter?

Several times Oklahoma Nick started and stared about him with his senses rousing. But all was still and peaceful. The horses had picked their fill, and were sleeping on their feet, with drooping heads and relaxed muscles. The sky was clear. There could be no danger—and of course he was going to sleep, but—

But he did, all the same, or appearances were wonderfully deceiving.

With heavy, sluggish movements, very unlike his usual lithe activity, Oklahoma Nick kept on for a few minutes more, walking his beat; but then, moving like one already asleep, or under the influence of some powerful drug, he dropped his rifle, staggered a step or two further, then sunk to the ground with a lifeless thump!

He struggled as though to arise, but it only resulted in straightening out his limbs. And then the sound of his heavy breathing went out on the still night air.

Then—was it some frightful nightmare?

A dark figure knelt with sharp knees digging into his laboring chest. Bony fingers met about his throat until his eyes flew wide open. And then one hand rose swiftly before his eyes, gripping a long knife that flashed in the starlight as a vicious hiss filled his ears:

"Give a kick or a whimper, an' slit goes your wizen, critter!"

CHAPTER VI.

"THUS FAR AND NO FURTHER."

THERE was no need to ask why Boomer Balt uttered that fervent ejaculation as his limbs gave way beneath him, and he dropped down, a limp and nerveless heap, now that his temporary goal was reached.

Though a fire had been kindled from the confused mass of what had once been a smart timber island, it could hardly be called a camp-fire. It was rather a poor beacon round which gathered the bruised, battered, wretched survivors of the Boomer colony.

Well might one be thankful he had no friends or relatives connected with the ill-fated expedition!

Not that there was so much of death or misery to be caught at the first glance, for the fire had been but recently kindled by a few of the survivors whose nerves were sufficiently strong, whose brains were clear enough to take thought of others. They were still piling up the splintered debris, still coaxing the crackling flames into vigor sufficient to bid the heavy rain defiance.

And yet, a single glance into any one of those hard, rugged faces was sufficient to tell the observer that something awful had occurred. Nothing in the ordinary course of human events could bring such a wild, haunted look into mortal face; an expression of fear, awe, grie-

stupor, and dull expectation that defies all description.

Henry Hornkohl came panting up to the spot, and the questions he would have put died away before they crossed his lips. Novice though he was, even he could not help reading a portion of the terrible truth in those drawn, haggard, haunted faces.

He leaned heavily against the splintered trunk of a tree, trembling in every fiber, racked with pain from sole to crown, each breath seeming to rend his tortured lungs.

Boomer Balt saw him thus, and divined something of what he must be suffering through his own sensations. It was difficult, but he staggered to his feet and caught his employer by the arm.

"They's bin awful doin's 'round here, pardner, an' mis'able as we both feel, it ain't a tit on a hog to them!" he muttered, with a slight nod toward the boomers.

"I know—it's awful!" with a shiver, as one of the hollow-eyed strangers passed close by them. "It's like—like corpses walking about! If one could only do or say something to help them!"

"Tain't us—it's others that needs help, stranger," hoarsely uttered one of the boomers, glancing over his shoulder as he thrust a bundle of splinters into the fire until its tip ignited. "Whar be they? We've got to go an' gether 'em up!"

The last words rose almost to a shriek as his pent-up emotions passed beyond his stern control. He swung the flaming torch above his head as he beckoned his comrades to follow his example, then staggered off into the stormy night.

Boomer Balt sprang forward and caught up a blazing branch, for the moment forgetting his own crippled condition in his solicitude for others still more luckless.

"Grab lights an' scatter out, lads!" he cried, his voice sharp and metallic. "Ye ain't even the ghosts o' men ef ye cower thar while they's sufferin' humanity waitin' fer aid an' comfort! Scatter out—an' the good Lord above grant we may do some good!"

It was little they could expect to accomplish with such rude and inefficient appliances, but the stupor was broken, and soon ruddy lights were dancing over the wind-scarred plain, now flaming up, now dying out until only a dull red spark remained.

But this first step led to others, and the rude torches were ere long replaced by lanterns as wagon after wagon was discovered where scattered by the howling tempest.

Here, as everywhere else that a record has been kept, the "twister" had played many mad freaks. Here, as it ever does, the cyclone had occasionally spared, as though through pure caprice—as though to emphasize its awful power through the force of close contrasts.

And on through the storm, through the clearing away of the clouds and the ceasing of the rain, beneath the brightly twinkling stars, under the clear light of the moon when it cleared the heavy ring of clouds that still bordered the horizon on every hand, those men labored, forgetting self, forgetting everything save the needs of their even less fortunate fellows.

It was a sad, even horrible quest; this searching for the living, to find the dead!

All through the rest of that night, the fire was kept blazing high and sending aloft its ruddy light. There was no lack of fuel. The mad twister had provided that!

One by one the dead, the dying, the wounded and crippled were brought in by the haggard searchers. Those whose troubles were forever at an end were soberly placed together where the disabled were not compelled to see them too plainly. The worst injured were aided as far as possible under the circumstances, and the rest joined the sad hunt.

Foremost among the searchers were Boomer Balt and Henry Hornkohl, and already they were receiving their reward for their humanity.

Perhaps it was the exercise that kept their sore muscles limbered up; perhaps it was witnessing so much suffering far greater than any they had felt or could feel; but certain it is that as the gray light of a new day began to appear in the East, and they paused to taste the hot coffee which some of the poor women had ventured to boil, both of our friends felt like new men.

Their looks, rather than their tongues said this much. With so much misery about them, they could hardly congratulate each other.

By the time day had fairly dawned, nearly all of the company had been found and accounted for: dead, injured, living. And as Henry Hornkohl listened to the gloomy record, he shivered with horror.

"It's terrible enough, but it might 'a' bin still wuss," muttered Boomer Balt, as he noticed that shiver. "Your fri'nds might 'a' bin in the comp'ny."

"Who knows? Perhaps they were struck by the same horrible storm!"

"God forbid!"

"Amen!"

While waiting the dawning of day, the worn and weary searchers ate and drank; not with

their usual appetites, but like men who force themselves to feed, that their sorely tried strength may not fail them when needed most. And while they ate, Boomer Balt and Henry Hornkohl learned their story; one that hardly required explanation, however, after what their own eyes had witnessed.

The company was bound for "the promised land," just as many another company in those land-mad days. They were in high spirits, for they had successfully eluded the soldiers whose duty it was to prevent invasion of the forbidden region, and they were already anticipating their arrival when death and destruction burst upon them.

They saw the storm brewing, and though not one among them all suspected the horrors which were to come, all saw that it was to be no ordinary storm. Making their way to a timber island, where wood and water was plentiful enough for their needs, the company began camping, though so much earlier than their accustomed hour for halting.

As the fates willed it, they stopped right in the course of the cyclone, and after the terribly significant "death-balloon" showed itself, they had no time for flight or preparation. Almost before the coolest-nerved among them all could realize the actual peril, the storm-demon dropped upon them, then—

Each one of the survivors had a different experience to relate. Different, yet with a blood-chilling sameness running through all; eloquent admission of man's impotence.

Without obtruding their own affairs too pointedly, our friends managed to learn that this company knew nothing about the family for whom they were searching. That was not so strange, after all.

"It's a mighty big country, pard," muttered Boomer Balt as he filled and lit his pipe. "An' it ain't like it was open an' free to all who tuck a notion to enter it. The boys in blue raally try to do thar duty as it's laid down fer 'em, I reckon, an' so a body that wanted to git thar the surest way, wouldn't be apt to hunt up comp'ny out o' thar own straight trail."

"If they only escaped that frightful cyclone!"

"We'll keep on hopin' fer the best, anyway. It don't cost no more, an' it's a mighty sight more satisfyin'," muttered Boomer Balt, with a little shudder as a cry of pain came from a wounded woman.

With the first gleam of the rising sun, search was resumed, but it came to an abrupt termination. A sharp cry broke from one of the men, and all eyes were turned in the direction of his outstretched hand.

A close, compact body of horsemen were approaching the spot, and though still far distant, a second look was not necessary for recognition. It was a squad of soldiers.

Silently the search was abandoned and the boomers returned to the spot where their dead and injured were collected. A few among them wore dogged, sullen looks, and a few hands turned over pistols and rifles; but for the most part it was a dull, listless, hopeless waiting for the inevitable.

Boomer Balt drew his employer a little to one side, where they silently waited the result. Though their sympathy was with the boomers, as was natural, after their experience of the past night, when they knew the right was on the side of the soldiers. There was a plain law, plainly forbidding the invasion. The boomers were law-breakers. The military were law-preservers. No cool brain could deny this, however unjust that law might appear in itself.

The boys in blue drew rein at a little distance, and their chief, a tall, handsome young fellow, dismounted and advanced alone. And as he glanced keenly, comprehensively around the scene of desolation, he uncovered his head with a grave reverence.

Under different circumstances all this might have taken on an altogether different color, for it is anything but a pleasant duty for a regular army officer to be sent upon; expected to keep the border clear of all invaders, yet forbidden to use the power they were expected to display.

Having paid this reverence to the dead, the young officer introduced himself as Lieutenant Ballingal, and asked for the leader of the colony. In silence he was shown a corpse, horribly mangled. The same answer was given to his speech as he asked for the second in command, and then he gave over the effort to discover the responsible head of the company, treating with them as a whole.

In a very few words he pointed out his sworn duty. He reminded them of the law, as it stood, just or unjust; with that he had naught to do. He was placed there to find and turn back all men who tried to enter the forbidden region, and he could only perform that duty to the best of his ability.

"As a man, I can sympathize with you; as an officer, I can only carry out the orders of my superiors," he said, gravely.

"Hain't we suffered enough, as it is?" fiercely cried one of the boomers, wild-eyed and aged years by the awful events of the night just past. "I come in here with wife and children an' a

little property to keep 'em alive while I made a new home fer 'em. Now—thar lays all there is left! Dead—dead—killed without time to say a partin' word! Without time to breathe a prayer!"

His voice choked, and he staggered back, falling on his knees beside his dead, mortal anguish shaking his gaunt frame.

The face of the officer turned white and his eyes closed for an instant like one whose heart is turning sick within his bosom; but he had a duty to perform, and he dared not neglect it too long.

He called in his men, and briefly gave them their orders. They were to scatter out and pick up what effects they could find that were at all worth carriage. And as there were still several of the party missing, they were to search closely for them, living or dead.

Disagreeable as this duty no doubt was to the soldiers, they were far too well disciplined to utter even a word to that effect; orders were orders, and they fell briskly to work.

Their coming, too, seemed to infuse fresh life into the company, and the work went on with redoubled energy.

The few sound wagons were collected, and others were patched up until fit for the road. Scattered effects were gathered up, sorted out, and piled on the wagons. Horses, mules, oxen, were herded and harness overlooked.

Other hands were caring for the wounded as best they could with such limited appliances. Fortunately there was a physician among the unhurt, and he worked unceasingly.

Now that the soldiers had come to aid in the work, Boomer Balt and Henry Hornkohl felt at liberty to take a much-needed breathing spell. They drew a little apart from the rest, conversing in whispers.

How would this meeting with the soldiers affect their purpose? Would they be placed under arrest, with the rest?

"Fer all he talks so smooth an' soft, they's a bit o' the bull-dog in that critter," muttered Balt, with a side nod in the direction of Lieutenant Ballingal, who was working as hard as any of his men in trying to straighten things out. "Them eyes o' his'n is heap too sharp fer either you or me to play Injun onto him. I might git off by takin' oath to a squaw an' pack o' papposes, but you ain't nigh so likely to be that sort o' cat!"

"We'll find some way out of the mess, never fear."

"Got to!" emphatically nodded the veteran. "Play missionary ef—"

He broke off abruptly, rising to his feet and shading his eyes with one hand as he gazed keenly toward the rising sun. Following his motions, Henry Hornkohl caught sight of a small clump of horsemen rapidly following a single rider toward the camp.

"Missionary no good!" snapped Boomer Balt, with a dark scowl as he dropped back to his former position. "That *does* cook my goose!"

"You know them? Who and what are they?" hurriedly demanded the lawyer, his brows corrugating.

"Tom O'Donnell, chief o' army scouts—no less!"

"How can his coming make matters any worse?"

"Mebbe not fer you, ef you kin make 'em b'lieve you ain't in my comp'ny," grunted Balt, thoroughly disgusted at the contrary turn affairs were taking. "Es fer me—that pesky critter knows me from A to Zed! Knows me too durned well to listen to any argyment! Knows I'm Boomer Balt by name, an' boomer Balt by natur!"

The chief of scouts rode up to the camp, touching his hat to the officer, taking in all the details at a single glance of his remarkably keen eyes.

"Didn't I tell ye so?" growled the white-haired guide as he saw those piercing orbs flash upon him for a second. "He's clapped his tag onto me a'ready! Be sure the boss won't let me slip through his grip woen he rounds up this gang."

Henry Hornkohl frowned and looked very grave, but made no reply. And he lay in silence when, shortly after, the chief of scouts came up and spoke to the old man, smiling grimly:

"Lost your way ag'in, Uncle Balt? Well, you are unlucky, sure!"

"Not so bad off as some others, anyhow," muttered the guide, with an involuntary glance toward a patient who just then uttered a wild scream of pain under the hurried hands of the doctor.

O'Donnell shrugged his shoulders as he replied:

"Ef they'd bin on lawful ground, the twister wouldn't 'a' hit 'em this round. Not but I'm sorry enough fer the poor devils," with a lowered, softened tone as his rugged yet not unhandsome face grew graver. "I kin feel fer them as well as any other man, but—waal, ef you only knowed how mighty monotonous you pesky critters makes it fer us unlucky devils, you could understand it better."

"Cl'ar as mud!" grunted Boomer Balt.

Tom O'Donnell laughed softly as he retorted: "Well, one thing's clear enough, anyway: an' that is we'll hev the sweet pleasure o' makin' the back trip in each other's company."

He turned away to join his men, who were already busy at work, and at a word from Lieutenant Ballingal he took charge of the task, leaving his superior to call the principal members of the party together.

He did this partly because he wanted the matter put on a plain basis at the earliest possible moment, but mainly because he had noticed some of the more hardy boomers passing among their fellows, whispering hastily, then passing on to others, and he knew that some sort of trouble was brewing.

Silently, sullenly the boomers answered his call, and it was a circle of dark, scowling faces upon which he gazed as he stood in their middle for a brief space in silence.

Then, gravely, clearly, he laid the situation before them. He recalled the laws that forbade them entering as settlers the Oklahoma region. He said that it was not a question of right or wrong, as viewed from a public standpoint, but purely a question of law. That law denied them admission. Another law sent him there to arrest and remove all illegal settlers. It gave him no option. It said he must enforce the law. And were he to show leniency toward even a single person, he laid himself open to court-martial and disgrace.

"That's naught to us," doggedly muttered one of the boomers. "The law you speak of was made fer the cattle kings. Was paid fer with tha'r money. It lets them go whar they will, fattenin' while we pore devils is starvin'. It ain't no law—it's a cussed outrage!"

"We've come this fur, an' we're goin' on to the end!" grated still another, with one quivering finger pointing to the silent row of dead friends and relatives. "Look at the price we've paid a'ready! Look at them—an' they'll be others to 'range beside 'em ef you hirelin's stan' in our road! I say it—I swar to it, too!"

A deep, sullen murmur ran around the circle. Lieutenant Ballingal stood in cold silence until this subsided before uttering a word. Then his voice was clear and earnest, graver than before:

"You will think better of this, my men, and that you may look at the matter from all sides, I have asked you to gather here so soon. You are not fools: You are not madmen, though I know you have gone through enough to unsettle almost any man's brain—and I am grieved to my heart's core as I recall all you have suffered, all you have lost."

"Talk is mighty cheap!" growled one of the boomers.

Lieutenant Ballingal turned upon the speaker, his blue eyes flashing vividly, his face stern, his voice clear and cutting as he cried:

"It must be, else your tongue would not wag so freely! It is just such miserable fellows as you—worthless, trifling, ever in mischief—as lead better men to grief and misfortune. Silence, sir! Another word and I'll buck and gag you!"

Cowed, the boomer slunk away. And Lieutenant Ballingal resumed:

"To you, gentlemen, I talk as man to man. You know that I am a soldier, bound to carry out the orders of my superiors. I must escort you back across the border, but I'll make matters as pleasant as lies in my power. This, if you are sensible enough to submit quietly."

"S'posin' we don't look at it that way, through your eyes?"

"Supposing you were foolish enough to try to press on by force; granting that you could brush us aside, or in some manner elude us; what then? Let me tell you what would come to pass in such a case," with sudden increase of gravity in voice and manner.

"Do you know how uneasy the Indians are growing at these repeated invasions? Do you know what the Cheyennes have openly declared? That unless this movement is checked, and that right speedily, they will take the matter into their own hands; and you can guess the result!"

"They won't no flies light onto 'em, anyway!"

"In other words, you would fight? You would resist their demands? When they tried to run off your stock, or plunder your wagons, you would pay them in cold lead?"

"Sartain sure we would!"

"And with your first shot stir up every red-skin in the Territory," was the swift retort. "What the end would be, I leave you to figure out for yourselves. They would hardly offer you a chance like the chance I am offering to you."

There was no response to this speech. The boomers interchanged uneasy glances. It was true, strange as it may sound, that they had not once given thought to how the Indians would take this wholesale invasion.

Lieutenant Ballingal saw that he had made his point, and he was shrewd enough not to press it too far, too hastily. He knew that each hour of quiet reflection would help to rivet the nail he had driven.

"You can talk the matter over between yourselves, and let me know when you have reached a decision. There is no particular hurry. As long as your injured friends are unable to travel we will watch with and for you. And now, I must go to send a courier with the news, and to bring back competent medical aid. Good-day, gentlemen!"

Boomer Balt drew a long breath as he saw the gathering disperse.

"Ef he'll only send Tom O'Donnell! Long's his cat's eyes is in the kentry, they ain't even a ghost of a chance fer us to slip off!"

Henry Hornkohl shrugged his shoulders with a slight smile at the evident perplexity of his guide. His own doubts seemed to have vanished since listening to the speech of the officer, and his manner was that of one who sees his way clear before him.

"Never fash yourself, old fellow," he said, coolly. "I've got a key in my pocket that will unlock a closer prison than this, ugly as it may appear to your eyes."

"What ye drivin' at, pardner?" eagerly muttered Balt, his eyes all aglow. "Ef you kin git out o' this, don't lose no more time then you kin help! Think—the twister may hev ketched the Wrights!"

Henry Hornkohl gazed keenly into the flushed face, curiosity filling his dark eyes.

"What is your particular interest in the Wrights?" he asked, almost sternly. "I thought they were strangers to you?"

Boomer Balt dropped his eyes for a moment, but then firmly met that searching gaze. And his old drawl came back as he replied:

"Waal, I didn't say jest that, did I? They's some I know less of, but they's others I know heap better. See?"

"That you are holding something in reserve; but let it go for now," with the shadow of a frown as he rose to his feet.

"An' you hain't kept back nothin', of course?"

There was a curious meaning in that drawling question, for query it was, but Henry Hornkohl only shrugged his shoulders and strode away to where Lieutenant Ballingal was busily overseeing the work of repairing the sadly-battered wagons.

Boomer Balt watched his employer touch the officer on the arm, apparently speaking earnestly. Watched them move slowly to one side, there conversing with seeming interest.

"Limber tongue be yours, lad!" the white-haired guide muttered to himself, eagerly watching the two men. "Butter him up an' butter him down! Butter him crossways ef he'll stan' it! Anyway, stick to him ontel he gives you your own way—fer that way is mine, too!"

And as he watched, Boomer Balt grew convinced that his employer was gaining his point, despite the doubts that assailed him at first, for there was a bright smile on the face of Henry Hornkohl as he parted with the officer and retraced his steps, to be met by his guide with a grim, yet joyful chuckle of delight.

"Done it, didn't ye, pardner? Lord! ef you was only a woman, I'd hug ye tell the ribs cracked—so I would, now!"

"Yes, I gained my point," was the quiet response. "After all, it was a very simple matter. I just told him of the Wright family and how they were slipping through for Oklahoma. Of course he couldn't stand that!"

"You told him that?" gasped Boomer Balt, wide-eyed.

"I did. He'll send a few scouts in search of them, and we've got permission to go along with them," was the cool response.

"That does settle it!" and Boomer Balt uttered a long whistle.

CHAPTER VII.

AN AWKWARD PREDICAMENT.

EVANDER WRIGHT rose to a sitting posture with many a grunt and groan, yawning until it looked as though the upper half of his head would presently fly back like the hinged cover to a box. Yawning until myriads of tiny stars flashed and glittered through his brain, and there came a pang so acute as to make him gasp and groan again.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think it was 'lection-time!" he moaned, clasping both hands to his throbbing temples. "Holy Abraham! what a head I've got on me! Was I drunk? Drunk, an' never knowed it!"

Staid and sober, head of a family and member of the church though he was now, Evander Wright had not always been such a model. Time was when he had been "one of the boys," and though that time was far past, there are some things which can never entirely be forgotten.

And during those first few moments of waking, this splitting headache, that bitter nauseous taste in his mouth, knocked many a long year off the calendar, and carried him back to the days of yore when it was deemed the sacred duty of each free and independent voter to "have a head on him" the day after election. Surely he *must* have been drunk! And yet—

With an effort he opened his aching eyes and stared around him. For a breath in stupid wonder at his surroundings, so different from those which were naturally connected with these 'lection-day relics. But only for a few seconds of time. Then the truth flashed upon him as he noted the tattered wagon-cover, and he started to his feet, to reel and stagger, stumbling over the prostrate figure of his son, who merely snored the louder in consequence.

"Wuss then drunk!" the boomer muttered as

he steadied himself by grasping a wheel of the nearest wagon, brushing his other hand across his eyes. "That twister must 'a' muddled us all up, fer here it's broad day an' never a soul stirrin' 'cept me—an' I'm asleep or dreamin', with a head onto me bigger'n all out-doores!"

The boomer was still so bewildered, his brain was still so befogged, that he hardly knew what he was doing or saying; but he was an obstinate fellow, with all his good nature, and not one to let a simple headache conquer him. By the red rays of the rising sun he knew it was long past their usual time for rising, and leaning against the wagon he winked rapidly until he was able to see about him.

The little tent was still closed, and not a sound came from within it, though, as a rule, Mrs. Wright was the first one astir in camp. Perry Wright lay snoring dully. The waif of the storm—

Evander Wright uttered a little cry and leaned forward, brushing a hand swiftly across his bleared eyes. There was the blanket he had given Jerry Viggles, but where was the man? Had he roused up before his host, and gone—where?

Evander Wright glanced around as these thoughts flashed across his bewildered brain, and a harsh, startled ejaculation broke from his paling lips as he failed to see the horses where he knew they had been staked out for the night.

Something of the miserable truth flashed upon him then, though he fought against it, muttering as he staggered forward:

"They ain't gone—the stranger's jest changed them to better pickin' while we was oversleepin'. They ain't gone. How could they—"

He stopped short, digging at his eyes again; but they were not at fault. And with a harsh, savage cry the boomer sprang forward, to drop on his knees at the side of Oklahoma Nick.

"Who done it? Whar's the stock? What does it all mean, anyhow?" he panted, glaring almost savagely into those dark eyes.

Instead of words, an inarticulate sound; a faint, smothered moan that drew his eyes to the lips of the guide. And as he saw the gag that distended the jaws of Oklahoma Nick—as he saw his bound limbs and the rope crossing his throat, pinned fast on either side—the boomer began to realize what all this meant.

He sprang to his feet with a wild roar, that caused Perry Wright to stir heavily and mutter inarticulately; that aroused the heavily slumbering women in their little tent. He glared about him, one hand fumbling at his waist in quest of a weapon; but only too well he knew the mischief was wrought and the workers far beyond his immediate reach.

Oklahoma Nick uttered another moan, lifting his tethered feet and thumping them against the sodden earth at the same time. Evander Wright turned toward him, and with a knife quickly set him at liberty.

"Wa—water—choking—"

Only a few feet away there was a small pool of water which had not entirely been absorbed by the hard earth, and as the shortest method, the boomer caught up the broad-brimmed hat that lay beside the guide, filling it from the pool and pouring it over the head and face of the gasping, choking fellow.

Once was enough, and Oklahoma Nick struggled to his feet, able to speak, though his tones were hoarse and unnatural, hard and strained.

"That devil—that liar!" he gasped, his handsome face fairly convulsed as he gripped the arm of the boomer, staggering toward the wagons. "Fooled us—stole stock—"

Somehow the very excitement shown by the guide served to steady the nerves of the boomer. He knew the worst, now, and it was bad enough in all conscience! Stranded in the desert! Without means of advancing or retreating! It was like being cast away on a desert island!

He knew the very worst, yet he grew cool and clear-witted. He clapped a broad palm over the lips of the guide—lips that were almost tinged with froth of madness—as he noted a stir in the tent. But if he hoped to keep the terrible truth a secret from his women until it could be broken more mildly, he was doomed to disappointment.

The door-flap was flung aside, and mother and daughter emerged, their pale and agitated faces showing only too plainly that they had heard too much to be satisfied with anything short of the entire truth.

"Yes, the stock is run off," gravely nodded the boomer, seeing that nothing less would serve. "Seems like mighty tough luck, but we're livin' an' well—an' that's more'n we expected to be last evenin'. It ain't no time fer cryin' an'—what on airth ails the boy?"

Mrs. Wright had sprung to the side of Pericles, who was still recumbent, still breathing heavily despite the noise about him. A gasp of mother-fear showed her alarm as she shook his arm and gazed into his flushed face. And it was this that caused Evander Wright to break off so abruptly as he strode to her side.

"Drugged!" hoarsely cried Oklahoma Nick, clearing his own mouth as of a nauseous taste. "That ragged devil drugged us all! No wonder he was so anxious to wait on us last night! The devil—the—"

His voice choked and he leaned heavily against the wagon.

With no little difficulty the young giant was induced to open his eyes, but when Evander Wright spoke of the stock being stolen, it acted on him like magic. He staggered to his feet, and after one bewildered stare about the spot, he turned to one of the buckets of water which had been filled during the heavy rain of the past night, plunging his head into it, holding it there so long that his agitated mother caught at his curly hair as though she feared he meant to commit suicide after this novel fashion.

Evander Wright was the only one of the little company who seemed cool and steady-nerved for a time. He bade the women busy themselves with breakfast, as usual, and then led the way out from the camp to where the horses had been staked out to graze.

"That *does* settle it!" he uttered, with a hard, grim laugh as he pointed to the picket-pins still firmly planted in the ground; to the ends of the trail-ropes, cut clean and smooth off. "It ain't a stampede. The stock was stole, sure enough!"

"And that devil done it!" grated Oklahoma Nick, his breath still coming short and quick. "I saw him—and felt him, too!"

One hand fingered his throat nervously. A red scratch caught the eyes of father and son as they turned toward him; a scratch that might have been caused by the keen point of a knife.

"You'll hev time enough to tell us all about it, lad," and Evander Wright laughed hardly, unnaturally as he turned to trace the hoof-marks in the damp soil. "They ain't no hurry 'bout hitchin' up *this* mornin'."

It was a grim jest, under the circumstances, and one that told how heavily the unexpected blow had fallen on the boomer, though he seemed so cool and unmoved, outwardly.

If the time should ever come to even-up matters, let Jerry Viggles guard himself!

In silence the trio followed the different trails until they joined in a single one, at no great distance from the timber island. And still in silence they obeyed the call to breakfast given by Otelia.

The two women were very pale, very anxious, as the men came in and seated themselves to the hasty meal provided; but, anxious as they were to learn the whole truth, something in that cold, stern face chained their tongues and stilled their impatience. Even the two younger men seemed impressed after much the same fashion, and not a word was uttered until the morning meal was disposed of.

Rising, Evander Wright passed over to the fire for a coal to light his pipe. A hard, grim smile curled his bearded lips as he saw Mrs. Wright mechanically begin to clear away the dishes.

"No hurry, mother," he said, with a short laugh. "I reckon we'll hev to take a day's lay-over. 'Pears like somethin's the matter with our runnin'-gear, an'—Thar, 'Melie!' his voice growing husky as he sprung to the side of the frail woman, whose sobs were choking her.

His arms wound about her slender form, drawing her close to his swelling bosom, his bearded cheek resting on her hair as he muttered:

"I didn't mean it jest that way, 'Melie. I didn't know jest what I was sayin' or how it'd sound to you—tried es you hev bin o' late. But it cuts deep—mighty deep! Jest as the clouds seemed breakin' away, too! To be left without a hoof—without—"

"And through me, why don't you say?" hoarsely muttered Oklahoma Nick. "I was supposed to be on guard, and—"

"That critter drugged you as well, lad," interposed Evander Wright, with steadier voice. "We ain't blamin' you. Ef anybody's to blame it's *me*. You was 'posed to takin' the dirty whelp in, but I wouldn't listen then. An' now—waal, what's done *is* done, an' swappin' words won't ondo it."

"That's what!" ejaculated the young giant, who was rubbing up his repeating rifle, his massive features stern and hard-set. "It's action, not talkin', we want most."

"Both is good enough in tha'r proper places, son," was the calm response. "We'll act, but fu'st we've got to look over matters: take stock, as it were."

"The stock is gone. They was stole. The trail lays out yender, plain enough fer a blind man to foller with his eyes shet. What else need we count up?"

"An' here's two wimmen, Perry."

"Never mind us, father," impetuously cried Otelia, a flush coming into her pale cheeks as her blue eyes lightened up. "We are women, but we can keep camp—and use a rifle, if we must!"

The boomer nodded approvingly, a smile lighting up his face for an instant. But then it grew grave and hard again as he said:

"You're both good stock, ef I do say it, 'Telie, nur I wouldn't be afraid to trust you two ag'in' a swarm of rascals ef better couldn't be; but it's only fools an' hot-heads that run into resks that kin be avoided by usin' a little jedgment. An' somehow it's bore into me that they's somethin' more in this matter than sim-

ple hoss-stealin', bad as that is, fixed as we be now."

"So bad that it couldn't well be worse! And all my fault!" bitterly muttered Oklahoma Nick, bowing his head and covering his face with his hands.

Evander Wright stepped quickly to his side, one hand kindly resting on his shoulder, his voice softened, his manner soothing:

"A little talkin' will do you good, lad, too. Tell us all you know 'bout the business. Even ef it don't make matters any clearer, it'll lift a mighty weight from your mind; an' you're our main-stay in this new trouble, mind ye! Without you to help us, we're ruined, to put it in plain words. But it must be you, yourself, cl'ar-brained, stiddy-narved, not a weak, shaken, groanin' critter like ye seem now!"

Rude, unpolished, blunt; but the words seemed just what Oklahoma Nick needed to rouse him from the despair into which this misfortune had cast him. He started to his feet, his eyes flashing, his voice even:

"Say that you don't blame me altogether—say that you will try to believe I would have lost my good right hand rather than have had this happen! Say that you—"

"Would jest as soon fault my own self as fault you, lad," was the earnest interposition as Evander Wright grasped his hand firmly.

"Nobody wasn't to fault, 'cept that infernal Jerry Viggles," impatiently muttered Perry, adding with an ugly scowl: "An' ef I don't Voggle him out o' his skin when I shet grip onto him, I'm a liar!"

He avoided looking toward his father as he turned and strode doggedly away, striking the fresh trail beyond the timber, bending low as he moved slowly along, looking for anything that might be of service to them in that crisis.

"Don't go out o' sight or hearin', son!" cried Evander Wright warningly, knowing that even his authority could no longer hold the young giant entirely idle. "An' now, lad," turning to Oklahoma Nick, "we'll listen to what happened to you last night."

The guide was now more like his usual self, though still somewhat pale, like a man who has gone through with a trying ordeal. He cast a covert glance toward Otelia, who had drawn a little aside with her mother, but who was awaiting with interest to hear his explanation.

Oklahoma Nick tried to conceal nothing, frankly admitting that he must have fallen asleep while on guard. Possibly—considering whose ears were drinking in his words—he might have been tempted to cover this unfortunate fact, had it not been so plain to be seen that all of the rest had been drugged by the rascally waif of the storm; as it was, he made no attempt to disguise his fatal weakness.

He told how he was aroused from his stupor by feeling the knees of Jerry Viggles digging into his chest, and his bony hands closing his windpipe. He told how the bare blade flashed before his eyes, and then swept swiftly down until he could feel the keen point pricking the skin of his throat; and a bright glow shot into his eyes as he saw Otelia Wright shiver and turn a shade paler as her eyes rested on the mark below his chin.

He said that he strove to cast off the wretch, but that, no doubt, owing to the drugged coffee which he had swallowed, he seemed weak as a child, and easily handled by the villain. He told how that weakness suddenly overcame him, and everything seemed to fade away to nothingness.

When his senses returned, he was lying on his back, bound hand and foot, a gag between his jaws. How, for many minutes he felt as if struggling with some frightful nightmare dream. How, as soon as he realized the truth, he strove to burst his bonds, to eject that cruel gag, to in some manner give the alarm. But only to find himself perfectly helpless.

"You saw how well the rascal did his work," he concluded, his eyes glowing redly, his voice hardening, his hands clinching tightly. "Only for the rope that crossed my neck I might have rolled over here and made out to awaken you."

"You done your best, an' no man could do more. You never saw no more then that one rascal, then?"

"No one else; and even he seemed more a phantom of some nightmare dream than aught human," was the response.

"Waal, it's a black bit o' luck, look at it any way we will," with a sigh which he struggled in vain to smother. "It'd be bad enough at the best, but comin' when we're here, with the soldiers an' the scouts all on the lookout! Hell's blackest cusses on that devil!"

Trembling Mrs. Wright stole to his side as the boomer leaped to his feet in this savage outburst. Pale-faced, Otelia caught his uplifted, quivering arm, and instantly the boomer grew calm under their touch, a faint, unsteady laugh coming from his dry lips.

"Thar—I feel better now! I hed to let it out or bu'st, ye see, dearies; but I won't do it no more—never ag'in, so I won't, now!"

The two women sobbed as his strong arms enfolded them, and after a brief hesitation, Oklahoma Nick turned and strode rapidly away over

the plain to where the young giant was still busied with the trail.

"They's more of 'em, you see," Perry grunted, looking up at the sound of footsteps. "I couldn't make it come right that Jerry Viggles was runnin' the bull job to himself."

The rain-soaked plain was in admirable condition to receive and retain a trail, and the veriest novice might have read the sign with but little difficulty.

Here the different trails came together, at a point where the camp was hidden from view by the clump of timber. The tracks of Jerry Viggles, still with one bare foot, were plainly to be distinguished from the others. And as the two men bent over the trampled space, several yards in diameter, and deeply scored, they could make out at least two other sets of human tracks, one large and deep, the other comparatively small and light.

"There were two helping him, at least," muttered Oklahoma Nick, rising erect and glancing along the trail which, after leaving the trampled spot, stretched away in a direct line, showing only hoof-marks. "There may have been more, for there are plenty of that splatter-foot prints. Two of about the same size, or else he was mighty uneasy and fidgety."

"Two or a dozen, it don't matter," doggedly uttered the young giant, his blue eyes glowing redly. "They've got our critters. Got 'em, but not fer keeps ef I know myself. I'm goin' after 'em, ef I have to take the trail alone!"

"You need not go alone," was the quiet response. "I was on guard when the animals were stolen. I lost them, and I'll recover them if I have to wade through blood—bah!" with a short, half-abashed laugh at his own impetuosity. "I talk as though an army had taken the stock, instead of a few miserable, cowardly devils of horse-thieves!"

"You kin go ef you want, but I'm goin' too," doggedly muttered the young giant as they turned toward the camp.

"Some one must stop behind to guard the wagon, to see that no harm comes to the women, though," said Oklahoma Nick.

"Father's the one for that, then. I'm goin'—you'll stick out for that much, won't you Nick? They's three, anyway, an' you're but one, good as you may be. I've got to go—don't you see?"

Oklahoma Nick made no reply, and as they were nearing the camp, where Evander Wright awaited them, Pericles was forced to smother his ardor as best he might until the proper time for asserting his rights.

Oklahoma Nick briefly reported the results of the search, adding:

"I feel mainly responsible for the loss, sir, and I have sworn to make that loss good. I mean to take the trail, and follow it until I recover the stolen animals, or until I find I am losing too much time in the attempt. Then—I'll buy horses of the Indians, if I can't do any better."

"We want our own critters, an' we're goin' to hev 'em, too!" impetuously cried the young giant, his face pale but resolute. "Say I kin go, father; fer I'm bound to go, anyhow!"

Evander Wright hesitated as he glanced from the face of his son to those of his wife and daughter. They were pale, and wet with tears. A sob broke from the mother, and she partly outstretched her trembling hands toward the youth as though imploring him not to risk the life so dear to her mother-heart. But with a choking sob she drooped her head. The horses must be recovered, or they were ruined. They could not remain long there without being discovered by the soldiers, and that meant being escorted out of the country, if no worse.

"I can do the work alone, Wright," slowly said Oklahoma Nick. "Even if it comes to a fight, I can get the best of those rascals. And some one must stop here to protect the women. Yes—I'll go by myself!"

"Then you'll have to find another trail, or else foller after me!" stubbornly declared Perry. "I'm goin'. With your leave, I hope, dad. But—all the same, I'm goin' to git back them hosses!"

Evander Wright frowned, but he knew that his son had made up his mind, and though as a rule so easily led by those he loved, Pericles was not one to be easily driven from a position he had once firmly assumed.

He touched Oklahoma Nick on the arm, and slowly moved away, his head bowed in deep thought. Silently the guide followed him, his own face pale and hard-set like one whose mind is but ill at ease.

Mrs. Wright crouched on a stick of timber, her head covered with an apron, her slight frame shaken with sobs none the less painful that they were silent.

Pericles glanced at his mother, his face growing still paler, but he showed no signs of softening. Instead, his massive jaws set still more firmly as Otelia glided to his side, one trembling hand touching his arm. He turned upon her almost roughly, but there was a strange uneasiness in her eyes, a peculiarity in her manner that startled him.

"Perry—dear brother!" she whispered, her voice sounding far from natural. "If you must go, I pray you heed my warning!"

CHAPTER VIII.

OKLAHOMA NICK SEEKS RE-ENFORCEMENTS.

THE young giant looked a little puzzled, as well he might. Otelia seemed so deeply in earnest. There was a glow in her lustrous eyes so unusual, so different from anything he had seen there before, that for a single breath he felt afraid for her poor brain.

"I'll mind anything you say, 'Telie, just so so you don't ask me to drop out an' leave Nick to run 'em down alone," he made reply, his arm closing about her trembling waist as he bent over her protectingly.

"If you would only promise me that! If you would only give up all idea of going, Perry! If you could only realize the awful fears that rend my poor heart, brother!" sobbed the girl, clinging to her twin as though she felt it impossible to part from him.

"That's 'cause you're a girl, 'Telie," half laughed her brother, one great hand smoothing her hair with a touch soft and loving as that of a lover. "That's 'cause you hain't clean got over your skeer from the twister, an' mighty little wonder, either! But this ain't no sech awful matter; it'll only be a bit o' trailin' an' a comin' back with our stock in the end. Nothin' more, 'Telie girl! Bless you, pritty, they ain't no fight in sech steal-by-night varmints as them—not a bit!"

With difficulty the maiden brought her voice under control, and lifting her pale, tear-stained face, Perry Wright saw a strange light in her great blue eyes; a look that impressed him strongly.

"I was not thinking of them—I never gave the thieves a second thought, Perry," Otelia said, her voice steady and clear, but sounding far from natural. "You have more to fear from a pretended friend than an open enemy," and she shivered again as she glanced toward the spot where Oklahoma Nick was standing with their father.

Perry followed the direction of her look, and his big eyes opened more widely than ever as he partly divined her meaning.

"Why, 'Telie, girl!" he stammered, taken all aback.

"He is your enemy—he means you ill—means us all evil!"

The young giant frowned, but it was more from perplexity than anger. Oklahoma Nick had never been a particular favorite with him, for reasons which will presently appear; but an enemy, and plotting evil against them all! Plotting evil against 'Telie, whom he loved so madly!

"It gits me—gits me, bad!" he muttered, shaking his head.

Otelia almost sobbed as she tightened her grasp on his arm, fairly shaking it in her earnestness.

"It is true, though I can't explain it so you can understand just what I mean, just what I feel, brother! Your greatest peril is there! He will work you evil, unless you watch him closely and constantly."

Her voice choked again and she hid her face in his broad bosom. He was more bewildered than before, but he patted her head soothingly as he whispered, hurriedly:

"I'll watch him, 'Telie girl. I won't never take the two eyes o' me off o' him a foot o' the way. Thar—don't cry. Pap's comin'!"

"Be careful—for my sake, dearest," whispered Otelia, reaching up and pressing a hurried, passionate kiss upon his lips, then moving away to the side of her mother as Evander Wright and Oklahoma Nick approached the spot.

Pale, anxious-eyed, the young giant gazed keenly into the face of his father as he came forward. This was the first time in all his life that he had ventured to assert his manhood so positively, and it was a serious matter to the young fellow. His heart leaped into his throat as he met the grave, anxious gaze of the boomer. A glad, yet smothered cry rose in his throat, and he strode forward with outstretched hand, his voice unsteady, but full of joy as he uttered:

"I kin go, pap? You ain't ag'in' it no longer?"

A faint smile crept into the face of the father as he clasped the big hand of his son. There was a slight tremor, a faint huskiness in his tones as he replied:

"Would it do any good if I was, son? Would you stan' back an' keep by the wimmen, leavin' me to foller them imps?"

The young giant hesitated, just a thought. His reply was low, but positive, and his big blue eyes fairly met those of his parent.

"It wouldn't, pap. I won't lie to you. I've set my mind on takin' the trail, an' I'm goin' to go—I've got to go!"

"Then I've got to stay behind, fer we can't leave the wimmen all alone by themselves, fer—"

"Why not, father?" impetuously cried Otelia, her face pale, her eyes glowing, a reviving hope in her features which only Perry could rightly interpret. "There is little here to tempt a thief, and even should any such come, both mother and I can handle firearms. Go with them, since brother will go! I beg of you, father, go with Perry!"

Evander Wright looked only too willing, but he slowly shook his head in reluctant dissent.

"It wouldn't do, nohow, 'Telie. You're wild to think it, even fer a minnit. Some one's got to stay, an' sense the boy's tuck the bit atwixt his teeth, I reckon that somebody's got to be me."

"It's my place, pap," muttered Perry, half-apologetically. "You cain't say it ain't my place, ef you look at it right."

Oklahoma Nick stood a little apart, listening in silence. His handsome face was pale and haggard, showing plainer than words that he had not entirely escaped suffering, both bodily and mentally. But he now ventured to put in a word or two.

"If it was left to me for decision, I'd say let both remain here. I am ready and eager to take the trail alone. If the thieves can be overtaken by a man on foot, I am that man. And if they are too quick for that, I can manage to get other stock from the Indians and bring them here alone. Even if the danger was tenfold what I believe it, I would rather dare it alone and single-handed than have a quarrel rise between father and son."

Evander Wright laughed softly as he turned and caught the hand of their guide, pressing it with a warmth that proved plainer than his words how far he was from feeling the doubts and suspicions which appeared to torture poor Otelia.

"Lord love ye, Nick! we ain't quarrelin', nur nothin' nigh it! Only it kinder sticks in my craw to hev to own up I'm gittin' old enough fer to hev to stand back an' let my son go ahead instead o' me! That's all they is to it, lad; never a quarrel—eh, sonny?"

"I feel like a dog, pap, but I cain't help it!" muttered Pericles, flushing hotly, hanging his head as he returned the boomer's grip with a vigor that made the elder man wince despite his fortitude. "Somehow I feel as ef I'd got to go, whether I wanted to or not!"

"Ain't I bin thar my own self?" laughed Evander Wright, with a suspicious moisture in his honest blue eyes. "Don't I know the time when I wouldn't take a back-seat no longer, even—well, 'Telie?" interrupting himself as he felt a trembling touch on his arm.

"Go with Perry, father, I beg of you," the maiden whispered, seeming strangely in earnest. "If two must go—if one must stay behind—go you with Perry, and let Mr. Van Bibber stop here!"

Puzzled by the unusual manner of his child, Evander Wright glanced from her face to that of the guide, a half-smile coming into his face as he saw how brilliantly the eyes of Oklahoma Nick were glowing, how flushed his face. But before he could speak, the guide interposed:

"That is out of the question, Miss Wright. I was on duty when the stock were stolen: I remain on duty until they are recovered, or their places made good by others as valuable."

He bowed low as he spoke, then turned abruptly away to one of the wagons, selecting food such as would not require cooking, putting it into a compact shape for carriage.

Otelia could say and do no more. For some minutes she had been fighting back a deathly sickness, and now it conquered her. She had barely time to gain the little tent before her strength failed her, and she fell across one of the cots, shivering violently, half-unconscious.

Mrs. Wright saw something of this in the pale, almost ghastly face of her child as she staggered past, and followed after.

"It ain't nothin' serious, an' mebbe it's best so," muttered the boomer, as Perry stared after the women. "It's the fu'st time you've set out to try your wings, lad, an' the home-birds nat'ally feel anxious."

Oklahoma Nick looked up from his preparations as he heard these words, and there was a half-smile upon his lips as he uttered:

"I don't really think there is any serious danger to be met with on this trip, friends, but since the women take it so hard, I wish you would let me go by myself. I'll do the work just as faithfully as if all of you were watching me."

"Nobody in this camp doubts that, lad," was the warm response, as Evander Wright aided his son in putting up a compact bundle of provisions. "I'll set you right with the women-folk, never fear. They'll look at it in a better light when they've had time to think it all over a bit. Perry's goin'—an' I only wish I was goin', too!" with a sudden emphasis and a dangerous flashing in his eyes as he recalled the vile treachery of the wretch whom he had fed and sheltered.

The young giant saw and rightly interpreted this emotion, and he gave his father's hand a parting grip as he uttered:

"Mebbe I'll fetch Jerry Viggles back fer you to lectur', pap! Ef I don't, it won't be fer want o' trvin' mighty hard, anyway!"

"Take keer o' yourself, son, an' don't be too brash. Look after him a bit, Nick; remember he ain't long out o' the nest. An' he's his mother's pet, too!"

It sounded ludicrous, these last words, looking at the young giant; so big, so strong, so self-reliant. But Oklahoma Nick nodded sober-

ly as the twain strode rapidly away from the camp, leaving the boomer gazing wistfully after them.

Active, long-limbed though Oklahoma Nick was, it tested his powers to the utmost to keep from being distanced by the young giant, who was nervously anxious to get beyond hailing distance of the camp before either of the women could make another appeal. Not that he would give them pain, for his love was strong and true; but he had only spoken the simple truth when he declared that something seemed to force him to join Oklahoma Nick in this attempt to recover their stolen property.

He was too matter-of-fact to be superstitious, in the common expectation of that term; but he really felt that a mysterious power was urging him on; a power against which he could not struggle.

He had almost forgotten the warning given him by Otelia. When it did occur to him, he brushed it from his mind as too idle for thought. Though he did not love Oklahoma Nick, he believed him honest enough, and the last man on earth whom he would select as a traitor.

When the clump of timber near which the party had camped was a mile away, the young giant slackened his pace. Oklahoma Nick laughed softly as he took the lead.

"So soon, Perry? And yet one would hardly pick you out for a quarter-horse!"

"I'll git thar as soon as you do, Nick," laughed the giant, with a glance over his shoulder. "Set the pace your own self, if you like, an' never doubt my keepin' within speakin' distance of your heels. I only put on that spurt to—waal, you see how the wimmen tuck on!"

A frown came over the face of Oklahoma Nick, and his voice sounded almost harsh as he muttered:

"I'm sorry you stuck out for coming, lad. Not but what I'm glad to have as sturdy and reliable backing, but it'll make my row still harder to hoe—with her!"

Perry made no reply. He knew well enough to what Oklahoma Nick alluded, but he was hardly in sympathy with him on this point, and certainly had no wish to discuss the matter then or there.

Oklahoma Nick said no more, just then, though it was no difficult matter to pick up the trail, after the thorough soaking the earth had received on the past night. Every hoof had left a distinct impress of itself, and untrained trailer though he was, Perry felt that he could point out the sign of each one of their eight horses.

"Pity we ain't each got four good legs under us!" he said, with a half-laugh. "A man could foller this trail with his eyes shet an' at full run!"

"Just now, and right here," was the dry response as the guide strode rapidly along, his keen eyes scanning the nearly level expanse before them much oftener than the trail at their feet. "It'll hardly keep on as plain traveling—unless those rascals have rigged up some sort of trap to catch any followers!"

"Trap be blowed! We'll spring the trap, an' git the bait, without losin' even a claw," laughed the young giant.

For several miles Oklahoma Nick led the way in silence, the trail remaining just as clear and undisguised. Either the thieves trusted to outpacing their pursuers, or else they felt strong enough to put them at defiance.

"They're making for the hills, from the looks," muttered Oklahoma Nick, after a long silence, his keen gaze passing far ahead and to the left, where a distant rise in the ground was now dimly visible.

"Hills or hollows, don't make no odds," doggedly retorted Perry. "Whar they go, we kin foller. An' good as the hosses is, a man that's in dead airnest kin run 'em down in time."

"If we had that time to spare, you mean; but have we?"

"We cain't git along without hosses, kin we?" half-angrily.

"Of course not, but if a chance offers to beg or buy other stock before we catch those rascals, we've got to take it. You know how closely those rascally scouts are scouring the country. You know what would be the result were they to find your folks."

Pericles made no reply. This was a point that worried him, even more than the loss of their stock. To be so near the "promised land," and yet to feel that any hour might bar their further progress. Like all other boomers, he knew the law, though he professed to regard it as an outrage rather than a law. And, like the others, he knew in his heart that it would be worse than folly to even dream of resisting those who had that law at their back.

Sullen, ugly-tempered with these thoughts troubling him, the young giant pressed on, urging Oklahoma Nick to quicker speed. The latter complied in silence, his own face grave enough, though his thoughts turned in a far different channel.

He had not missed the strange manner of Otelia Wright when she drew her brother aside just before the start was made, and that was troubling him intensely. He longed to know what she had said; longed, yet dreaded to ask.

Had Otelia revealed all that passed between them during the darkness after the passing of the cyclone? He knew how close was the tie of sympathy between the twins; knew how great the influence which each had over the other. And though he had spoken against the coming of Perry, he vastly preferred his company on that trip to any other. For one reason, because he had resolved to make an appeal to the brother to side with him in his love-suit.

"Did 'Telie tell you what happened last night, while we were lost in the dark?" he abruptly asked, looking keenly into the face of his companion, hoping to read the truth there before Perry could school his features, in case he should have aught to conceal.

His mind was instantly set at rest on that particular point, for he could not mistake the blank, yet puzzled look which filled the honest face of the young giant; and he hurriedly added:

"It wasn't so much, after all, though I'm afraid I did more harm than good to myself. You know—I've no secrets from you, lad!—how I feel toward 'Telie. You know that I've got the good word of both your father and your mother."

He ceased abruptly as he noticed a dark frown come into the face of Perry Wright. The voice of the young giant was hard and almost threatening as he spoke sharply:

"An' you crowded the poor girl then—when she was more'n half crazy 'bout us? It wasn't white—it was mighty low-down in you, Nick Van Bibber!"

"I'm sorry you think so," slowly returned the guide, his face averted for the moment, his voice unsteady as from strong emotion. "Try to put yourself in my place, Perry. Try to think yourself as deeply in love as I am with 'Telie. Out there in the dark, in the storm, believing all of her family destroyed by that horrible cyclone—feeling that she had only you to lean upon, only you to guard and cherish her. Try to realize this, and then say if you wouldn't have acted just as I did."

"All the same, it wasn't clean white," was the dogged response.

"I'm sorry for it now, seeing how it's turned out," added Oklahoma Nick, abandoning that point as hopeless. "I'm afraid I've made it still harder to win her love—but I'll win it, yet!"

"I ain't so sure o' that!" muttered Perry, his mind reverting to the warning which Otelia had given him.

Surely that did not look over-bright for the handsome guide! And in his heart of hearts he was glad to feel this assurance, too.

Oklahoma Nick gazed keenly into his face at this remark, but when he had occasion, the young giant could be secretive enough for two.

"What did 'Telie have to say to you, back yonder?" almost sharply demanded the guide, frowning darkly, his eyes blazing with mingled anger and anxiety. "It was something about me: I could tell that by the way you both looked at me, more than once. What was it, Perry?"

"Nothin' that would please you over-well, so I reckon it's just as well to keep it quiet," was the cool retort.

Oklahoma Nick turned and stood squarely in the other's path, his face pale, his voice full of strong emotion as he uttered:

"Perry, don't you turn against me—don't, I beg of you! I know how 'Telie listens to you: I know how easily you can bring her over to your way of thinking, when you set out in sober earnest. Try it for my sake, won't you? Tell her how I love her—how completely my happiness is bound up in her—how utterly wrecked I will be without her love! She will listen to you, even more than to her father or her mother. You can serve me well in this, if only you will. Say you'll try?"

Those blue eyes met his anxious orbs frankly, steadily, and Perry Wright listened without a word of interruption until the voice of the guide, grown hoarse and unsteady, ceased. Then he spoke, coldly, firmly:

"Ef I could do all that, I wouldn't make a try, Nick Van Bibber. An' you're wastin' your breath in idle talk. I like you well enough as a man, but you ain't good enough fer 'Telie. I've told her so, many an' many's the time. I'll tell her so ag'in, ef needs be."

"You mean this, Perry?"

"Every word of it," was the sturdy reply. "I never did like you over well, even before you give the evidence that helped to put a death-mark ag'inst the name o' Maurice North, an'—"

"I was sworn to tell the truth; how could I lie?"

"An' I've liked you still less ever sence that day," steadily added the young giant. "You've got the old folks on your side. They take a heap stock into you, but I'm glad 'Telie don't. You ain't good enough fer her, an' you know that, jest as well as I do. Still, her will is my law. I don't want her to marry you, an' I never yit give you cause to think I did. I hope she'll find a better man some day. Still, as I said, her will is my law. Ef you kin win her love, I'll never say a word to change her notion. But don't you

ax me ag'in to play your hand, fer I won't do it—an' them's words with the bark on!"

Perry Wright turned aside sufficiently to pass by the guide, and struck out briskly along the trail. If he remembered the anxious warning given him by his sister, he never betrayed that fact by a backward look, though he knew his blunt words must have cut deeply.

Oklahoma Nick, dark-faced and dejected, followed hard in the footsteps of his mate. Neither broke the silence until several miles were being crossed; then the guide hastened forward and touched Perry on the arm. His face was pale and grave as the other looked into it, but his voice was clear and friendly as he spoke:

"You were right, and I was wrong, Perry. If I can't win her love on my own merits, I don't deserve it. Try and forget what I asked of you, and don't lay up ugly feelings against a friend."

The young giant smiled gravely as he accepted the proffered hand and shook it cordially.

"Let it go at that, pard. While I can't say a word in your favor that way, I won't stan' in your way more'n I kin help. Her will is my law, an' ef she k'n love you, you're a brother to me. That's the best I kin say just now, Nick."

"It's enough, and I thank you for it, too!" with a hearty grip and brighter smile. "With you neutral, I don't despair of winning her; but with your influence against me, all the rest would go for naught. Once more—shake! Some time you'll know how grateful I am to you, lad!"

On apparently the best of terms, the two young men pressed on along the trail, which led direct toward a slight rise in the level, the plain then stretching on as before. And hardly had the eyes of the young giant lifted above this rise, than a sharp ejaculation broke from his lips. But before he could give an explanation, Oklahoma Nick leaped past him to see for himself what was in view.

Far away, seemingly grazing at will, was a single horse, saddled and bridled. And the moment the guide saw this he exclaimed in wonder:

"It's my nag—it's Cherokee, for a thousand!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

"It looks mighty like Cherokee, anyway!" muttered the young giant. "But what's he doin' out yonder alone? What's the other critters? What be the durned thieves as run him off, 'long o' our horses?"

Oklahoma Nick made no immediate response. He mechanically felt for the pair of field-glasses which he was accustomed to carrying at his side, for the instant forgetting that they had been ruined when the wings of the cyclone hurled him from his saddle the night before. His head was barely on a level with the grass, his eyes sweeping keenly about the spot where the single horse stood grazing.

"It's Cherokee, safe enough," he muttered, like one who gives unconscious utterance to the thoughts which are troubling his brain. "I didn't think I could fool myself—but how is it? What's he doing out yonder, without any one nigh?"

"That's mighty easy settled," ejaculated Perry Wright, as he pushed past his companion, plainly with the purpose of taking the shortest course to solve the mystery.

"Are you crazy, man?" ejaculated Oklahoma Nick, catching the young giant by the arm and whirling him half way around with a force that, being so suddenly exerted, would not be denied. "Would you run your head into a trap like that?"

"How d'you know they's any trap about it?" frowned Perry, but with a sudden flush coming into his honest face that spoke of awakening shame at his own impetuosity.

"Of course I don't know," half-laughed the guide, still using his eyes to the best advantage, scanning every yard of space which he could command without too openly exposing his own head above the rather profuse grass which covered the second plateau. "Still it don't look reasonable that those cunning rascals would leave a pretty fair plug like Cherokee behind like this. You can see that they took the trouble to saddle and bridle him. That looks as though one of the gang fancied him for riding even more than their own nags."

Perry Wright gave an impatient grunt. He cared little for what might have been; what was interested him far more.

Oklahoma Nick laughed softly as he rightly interpreted this sound.

"Patience, pard; there's time enough. Your father wouldn't be in any such rush, if he was here in your place. He'd say to make sure of one point before trying another."

"I ain't grumblin' at the tryin'; it's the talkin' it over so long," grimly retorted the young giant, nodding his head like one who feels he has successfully made a point.

If Oklahoma Nick felt the prick, he showed no signs. Cool and deliberate as ever he searched the space before him, clearly resolved to take no unnecessary chances.

"We can easily make up a few minutes lost, when we see the way clear before us," he mut-

tered, still in that half-unconscious tone. "But if one of us gets a lead mine deposited in our system, how then?"

With a snort of mingled anger and disgust, Perry Wright dropped to the ground, counterfeiting a sleepy yawn as he muttered:

"Wake me up when ye git ready to do somethin', won't ye?"

Despite its chestnutty flavor, this gibe proved quite effectual. Oklahoma Nick quit his futile gazing, and dropping back a pace or two, drew his keen knife and began cutting bunches of the tallest grass near them, twisting it into a rude clump and drawing it over his head and face to his shoulders. As he used his fingers to make apertures through which he might make use of his eyes, he spoke shortly:

"You'll have action enough to keep you awake if what I more than half suspect is true, my lad! Just hold your impatience in check for a second longer, and I'll be ready to keep up my end of the whippetree!"

He moved forward, lowered his grass-crowned head as he crept up the rise until the level was gained. Then, hidden beneath his verdant disguise, he keenly scrutinized the ground before them.

The saddled horse was alone visible. Not another of its kind was near, and it seemed a foolish waste of time to hesitate longer before advancing to secure the unexpected prize.

But Oklahoma Nick seemed to feel the responsibility that rested upon his shoulders, and took nothing for granted. As he could tell from the spot where he lay, the horse was standing in grass amply tall enough to cover a man while lying down. And not only that, but within a few yards of the animal he noted a low, dense patch of scrubby bushes where a score of enemies might easily lie in ambush if necessary.

Cautiously backing down from his position, he turned to Perry Wright and made known the result of his observations.

"I don't say they *are* there," he concluded as he removed his disguise and fell to work cutting more grass, "but I do say that they *may* be; and I'm not going to take any wild chances. If it's a trap, I think I can unmask it without showing our own hands too plainly."

As he spoke he was rapidly arranging a grassy crown for his companion, fitting it to his head after a fashion that left him the power to use his rifle without inconvenience.

"Crawl up yonder, lad, and get a good ready," he added, himself taking position a few yards to one side. "I'll give Cherokee a call, and if he's simply astray, be sure he'll answer it quick enough. If he don't come—well, we'll see if we can't take both him and the cunning devils who think to use him as a bait to their trap. See?"

"I'll do my part, never you fear," was the quiet response as the young giant made ready for work. "If the imps break cover, they'll hear something drop—now I tell you!"

Each of the scouts had a tolerably fair view of the horse and its surroundings, thanks to the grass which disguised their own movements, and with rifles ready for instant use, the signal was given.

At that familiar whistle, Cherokee lifted his head with a short whimper, the picture of eager attention. Again—and the intelligent animal rushed forward—only to be brought up with a sharp pluck!

One end of its trail-rope was fastened about its throat and the other led back to the scrubby bushes, as both of the scouts could now plainly distinguish.

"That *does* settle it!" muttered Oklahoma Nick, in tones that were only loud enough to reach the ears of his comrade. "Look out for breakers, Perry! Ten to one the imps are straining their eyes for a shot!"

"What's the matter with givin' 'em plain notice we're here, an' on pure business?" quickly responded the young giant. "We kin rake that bit o' bresh too easy! An' I'm goin' to do my share right now!"

Without giving Oklahoma Nick time to agree or dissent, Perry opened fire with his Winchester, sending bullet after bullet through the little thicket, slightly shifting his aim with each swiftly succeeding shot, and only ceasing when his magazine was quite empty.

Not a return shot was made, nor did a cry or a groan come from the thicket to tell of execution other than cutting off stems and splintering stalks. And though Oklahoma Nick kept his weapon ready for a shot at the first sign of an enemy, he was not gratified.

Eagerly the young giant peered through the smoke of his own creation as he deftly refilled his magazine, but as he saw nothing, heard nothing, even his sanguine hopes could no longer hold out. He felt ashamed of his own precipitate action, though he tried to cover it with a careless laugh as he recklessly sprung to his feet, flinging off his headdress of grass.

"Well, what of it? It saves time, anyway, an' we kin spare a few cartridges better than we kin an hour!"

"Cover, you crazy rascal!" cried Oklahoma Nick, sharply, himself leaping forward as though to enforce his commands. "There may be some of them still—"

"I'll stir 'em out then," laughed Perry, strid-

ing forward. "You tumble 'em over as I flush 'em, won't you?"

Oklahoma Nick made no reply, for even he could no longer doubt the utter absence of danger. The trap was no trap. The supposed ambushade existed only in his imagination!

Perry Wright walked through the little thicket, smiling at the visible effects of his rapid fusilade. Though his lead had hurt nothing more than bushes, he had the dim satisfaction of feeling that had even a single enemy been in ambush there, one or more of those bullets must have found him out.

Oklahoma Nick passed his whimpering steed with only a look, following the taut trail-rope to where its other end was caught about a strong bush, plainly showing that the rope had been dragging free to become entangled as the animal grazed; or, what seemed more likely, as it was making its way back to its master.

The guide seemed just a little crestfallen as this became clear, and for a few minutes seemed reluctant to meet the eyes of his comrade. But the young giant was content with indulging in an occasional smile. Although the affair had turned out so tamely, he knew that Oklahoma Nick had shown much more wisdom than had marked his own conduct. Everything indicated a cunning snare, and the guide had only used common prudence in trying to spring it without getting caught.

"What do you make of it, anyhow, Nick?" Perry asked, when the guide completed his hasty examination of the ground immediately around the thicket.

"There's only one set of tracks, and Cherokee made them. He must have thrown his rider, or got loose when they halted for something, for they wouldn't go to the trouble of stealing him just to turn loose again. He took the back-track, and the loose rope got caught in that bush," was the reply.

"I don't reckon you're fur out, pard. Any-way, we're one hoss better off then we was a bit ago. Pity it ain't two! We'd run in on the imps afore they knowed it, then."

Oklahoma Nick was silent, his eyes down-cast, his face bearing a troubled look which the young giant was not slow to observe. Jumping to a conclusion, as was his wont, Perry laughed and said:

"It's simple enough ef ye only look at it the right way, pard. Ride an' tie—no less! That way Cherokee'll be good as a hoss an' a half, at the lowest cackilation!"

"What bothered me was to know which trail to follow," slowly uttered Oklahoma Nick. "The one we was on of course is the plainest and the easiest to follow, if only because the sun is rapidly drying up the ground; but where time is of so much importance, wouldn't we make more by tracking Cherokee back?"

Perry Wright grew sober-faced at this. Though he had been so strangely eager to start in pursuit of the horse-thieves, he was one better fitted to follow than lead. And now that there arose an important question, he was at a loss how to answer it.

"Bein' astray, wouldn't Cherokee lose a heap o' time in pickin' an' goin' crooked?" he ventured, almost timidly.

Oklahoma Nick slowly shook his head. "I hardly think it, lad. He's no fool. He must have felt he was in bad company, and when he got loose I'm pretty sure he'd take the shortest cut back to where he left his master."

"The main trail runs mighty straight, too!"

"It has, this far. But who can say how soon it sheers off? That Jerry Viggles was no fool, or he couldn't have played his game so slick on old stagers. He knows well enough that some of us will surely follow after him. If he don't want us to catch him too soon, won't he try to throw us off his trail? Or else ride so fast and hard that we have a mighty poor chance of catching up by keeping to his trail? And if he wants us to catch up—well, I'd rather take him from the rear than come at him in front—that's all!"

The young giant scratched his head, thoroughly puzzled. Either course seemed to have its disadvantages, but he could not decide which offered the greatest chance of success.

"Ef we only knowed how long it was sense Cherokee give 'em the slip!" he muttered, with a wistful look at the horse. "He's smart, but I don't reckon he kin tell us that much!"

"Hardly," with a short laugh, as he took a silver dollar from his pocket and sent it spinning high above their heads. "Tails we stick to the main trail, heads we—and heads it is!" as they both eagerly bent over the bright coin as it fell in the grass. "We'll follow back on the trail left by Cherokee, then. Up with you, lad! I've had more practice trailing than you, and until we see how the thing pans out, you can do the rigging for us both!"

Without waiting to see how the young giant received this decision, Oklahoma Nick began picking up the trail, still pretty distinct, though the warm rays of the sun had dried up the surface moisture remarkably.

After the trampled space about the thicket was cleared, the trail led off in an almost direct

line toward the still distant hills, thus seeming to justify the reasoning of the guide. And then he turned to Perry, saying:

"I'll stick to this trail for a time, anyway, but suppose you ride over to the main track? Follow it until it makes a turn, if it does. A yelp will reach me, and then we'll decide further."

Although Perry hardly comprehended the full meaning of this alteration in their recently-formed plan, he offered no objection. Just so they kept moving in the right direction, he was content to let Oklahoma Nick do all the planning.

For a mile or more the two trails ran almost side by side, only diverging a trifle; but then Perry drew rein and uttered a sharp cry. Oklahoma Nick waved a hand, and the youth rode rapidly across to him.

"They've turned sharp to the left, pard," was his report.

"As a blind, then," immediately decided the guide, his keen eyes glancing along the single trail, which led in a direct line toward the hills. "They're up to some trick, I reckon. I can't see any other excuse for their making such a break. Well, anything else?" almost sharply, as the young giant hesitated.

"Waal, I didn't know—but I see one place whar a hoss left the main trail, with toes p'inted to'rds the thicket, back yender. An' then ag'in I see a track comin' to the trail from over your way."

Oklahoma Nick laughed softly, nodding his head approvingly.

"Glad to see you keep your eyes open, lad, though as you let it go by without mention, I had my doubts. That was where Cherokee took a shy at something. I caught his tracks on ahead, and didn't take the trouble to follow the bend."

"Ef you're satisfied, I am," grunted the young giant. "What next? I'm in fer anythin' that don't keep us back too slow."

"We'll stick to Cherokee, then," decided Oklahoma Nick, setting off at quickened speed. "We know he came from the imps, and we know, too, that he never laid any traps for us. I'd hate to swear the same for Jerry Viggles and his gang."

It was now high noon, but neither of the trailers seemed to care for eating. The trail led direct for the broken ground, where water was almost certain to be found, and though each carried a canteen with him, the heat of the sun had warmed the contents too thoroughly to tempt their palates.

"It ain't the eatin' so much," grunted Perry, his blue eyes flashing with a dangerous light as he gazed longingly toward the broken ground before them. "Ef I knowed it'd give me one squar' whack at that tormented Jerry Viggles, I'd sw'ar off grubbin' fer a solid week!"

Oklahoma Nick frowned soberly as he answered:

"If we don't run on to him *too soon*! Only time's so precious, I'd lay over until dark, I feel so certain that he's put up some dirty job to get the best of us. Only for you—"

"Don't you fret 'bout me!"

"How can I help it, man?" with sudden impatience. "If anything happen to you, how could I go back to face your mother? How could I carry the news to her?"

"I'll tote it my own self, an' so save you the trouble," lightly laughed the youth, without a shadow of fear or doubt, without the faintest suspicion of what lay before him.

Oklahoma Nick strode on, at times breaking into a run where the single trail lay more distinct. Rapidly they covered the ground and drew near the higher ground, here rising almost to the dignity of mountains, broken by many a deep defile, rising in many a bare, rocky ridge, though quite heavily timbered at points.

The trail led straight to the base of this broken tract, and Oklahoma frowned uneasily as he scanned the prospect. At almost any part there was ample cover for an enemy to lie in wait. And the fact that from some where in that vicinity Cherokee must have broken away from his captors, was by no means reassuring.

"If you would only stop back here and let me take a look on ahead, lad!" he muttered, with a side-glance into the face of his companion. "It would be safer for us both, if there is any trap set," he added in haste, as Perry drew himself up with a scornful toss of his head. "Even if those imps are lying yonder in wait, they wouldn't dare to open on one of us alone, while the other is too far off to reach. They—"

"Then you wait, an' I'll tell 'em you're comin'!" cried young Wright, sending Cherokee swiftly forward, looking back over his shoulder with a grin of triumph.

He reached the rocks in safety, drawing rein and grasping his rifle as he swiftly, keenly scanned the rugged heights before him, longing to catch a glimpse of Jerry Viggles and his fellow-thieves. But he was doomed to disappointment in this. Not a human being was visible. Not a stir or a sound came from the rocks to indicate the presence of an enemy, even after Oklahoma Nick reached his side.

The trail entered a narrow defile a few rods to the right of the point struck by Perry Wright,

and after a little hesitation, Oklahoma Nick led the way into the pass. But before they had covered half a mile more, the trail was lost, nor could their closest search recover it. The soil was hard, full of flinty stones and gravel. A regiment of cavalry might have passed over it without leaving any too plain a trail.

Oklahoma Nick stopped short, wiping his damp brows, his dark frown showing how utterly he was baffled.

"We kin turn back an' hit off the main trail ag'in," dubiously muttered Perry Wright, with a very wry face as he thought of the great waste of time—and time was very precious to people in their fix.

"And run head-first into any trap these cunning devils have rigged up for us!" growled Oklahoma Nick.

"Better resk that then waste more time here."

The guide made no immediate response, but his eyes were as busy as his tongue was idle. He glanced up the steep ridge that barred their way, and then cast a keen look all about them before speaking:

"There's one chance left. It'll be a tough climb, but from the top of this young mountain, we'd ought to get a mighty wide view. Who knows but what we may sight those imps? It's well worth trying, anyhow!"

Perry Wright made no objections. All he wanted was to be doing something, and leaving Oklahoma Nick to look after Cherokee, who would have to be abandoned for the time being, he breasted the steep hill.

It was a long and difficult climb, and both of the men were forced to pause for breath more than once before they gained the crest. From each stopping place they looked eagerly about, only to meet with disappointment. They saw naught to reward them.

Reaching the crest, they found it to afford a much less extended view than had seemed probable. Instead of a mere ridge, it turned out to be a sort of table-land, stretching out for some distance, and showing points further ahead which promised a still better lookout.

In this manner they were led on for fully a mile, improving each opportunity that offered for scanning the distant plain, still without discovering aught of the enemy. And then, as a narrow but deep canyon cut off their further progress in that direction, Oklahoma Nick dropped down like one utterly exhausted, panting:

"We've got to rest and eat some time, and it might as well be now, and here. One might wish for better water, perhaps, but it's wet!"

Weary though he was, Perry Wright could not so easily abandon the hope which had led them so far astray, and moved sulkily along the edge of the canyon, peering into its depths, sounding its darkest nooks as though he felt their game had sought refuge there. And he was thus engaged, when a sharp cry from Oklahoma Nick caused him to wheel about—to see a man springing upon him from behind a rock!

His rifle was slung across his shoulders, to leave his hands free for scaling the rocks, but he snatched a revolver from his belt.

Only to drop it with an angry roar of mingled pain and vengeance as the bright flash of a pistol shot out almost in his face. He reeled unsteadily for an instant, then lunged forward, clutching the assassin in a mighty grip that threatened to crush bones to powder.

This much Oklahoma Nick saw as he sprang to his feet with that warning yell. But before he could take a step toward his imperiled comrade, two men sprang toward him, firing as they came. And forced to meet them, the guide whipped out a pistol and set it to playing rapidly.

He saw one of the fellows stop, staggering as though hard hit. Saw him turn and rush away even faster than he had come, closely followed by his fellow. The guide sent a couple of hasty shots after them, then wheeled to see how Perry Wright was faring—to see him reeling on the very edge of the canyon! To see him fall over backward, still with that death-grip about his assassin!

One wild shriek of awful terror—then—silence!

CHAPTER X.

"IT NEVER RAINS BUT IT POURS."

It is proverbially harder to wait than to work, and few ever more fully realized this wretched fact than Evander Wright from the time his son and Oklahoma Nick passed beyond his range of vision along the trail left by the horse-thieves.

If there had been something for him to do; but there was not. He could only wait; wait and "eat his heart out with impatience."

He knew by the sounds from the little tent that the women were aware of the departure. He was man enough to dread joining them while their tears were flowing; man enough to feel impatient with them for giving way to such silly fears.

"To hev it come jest now—jest when an hour's travel is wuth a week o' ordinary weather!" he grated, his brows corrugating, his teeth clicking viciously as he strode over to the wagons, hop-

ing to find some occupation there which would aid him in killing time. "Jest as it looked dead sure we'd giv' 'em all the slip, an' was well beyond the lines they watch the closest! Jest as it seemed we was free to take our pick an' choice o' the best! Jest then—a dirty, whinin', miserable whelp like you, Jerry Viggles!"

His flaming eyes rested on the blanket which had been loaned the pretended waif of the storm, and, church-member though he was, Evander Wright ripped out a sonorous oath as he caught up the article, split it from top to bottom, flung the fragments into the fire, driving them well into the coals with a thrust of his heavy boot that sent the hot ashes and sparks flying all about.

He drew a long breath, casting a glance toward the closed tent as though afraid of being seen, and then turned his back with face flushed and half-ashamed.

But the outburst had done him good, oath or no oath!

He busied himself among the things which had been most disturbed by the overturning of the wagon, and while thus engaged became aware of the reappearance of his wife. For a little while he fought shy of her, stealing covert glances at her pale, care-worn face; but as she silently set to work clearing away the breakfast things, and as Otelia still remained invisible, he finally ventured to accost her:

"Waal, mother, they ain't nothin' gone wrong with the child, is they? 'Telie ain't tuck sick?"

Mrs. Wright shook her head silently, though the expression of care and worry deepened in her eyes. Sluggish, slow-going as he was, Evander Wright saw that there was something wrong; but before he could put his questions into shape, Otelia stepped from the tent and slowly came to his side.

She was very pale and her eyes were red with tears. Her voice was unsteady, and her manner almost hysterical as she clung to his side, sobbing out her fears for her twin brother.

She told him of her strange, horrible presentiment of coming evil; of the danger which something told her threatened Perry from the hand of Oklahoma Nick. She begged him to leave them in charge of the wagons, and hasten in pursuit of the two young men, either keeping them company or else bring Perry back with him.

Wright was startled, as well he might be, but though he felt like laughing in her face at such a ridiculous fancy, he saw that the poor girl was terribly in earnest. He questioned her closely, only to learn that she had no real foundation for her superstitious fears. Never by word or look had Oklahoma Nick give her cause to suspect him of such a dastardly act. And though he reasoned with his child, taking pains to show her how foolish she was in yielding to such nonsensical fears, Evander Wright felt more like giving her a good shaking.

"I'd do it, too, 'Telie, only I see you ain't well got over your skeer o' the cyclone. You never was any *too* jest to the boy, though he only done his bounden duty when— But never mind! You go lay down an' try to sleep. You'll wake up laughin' at your silly notions."

It was tolerably clear that Mrs. Wright took much the same view of the matter as her husband, for Oklahoma Nick was a favorite of them both. Dearly as they loved their daughter, they wished no better fate for her than the one offered by the dashing young guide.

Mrs. Wright prepared a hot draught for Otelia, forcing her to swallow it and then lie down. Silently the girl obeyed, and shortly after dropped off into a heavy, yet refreshing sleep.

It was past noon when she awoke, more like her ordinary self, and she even smiled when Evander Wright rallied her on her fantastic superstitions of the morning.

"I trust it may prove no worse than you think, father," she said in low tones, never looking up from her plate. "Indeed, I begin to be half ashamed of my folly, already!"

There was little hunger and less eating that meal; but the "going through the motions" would help consume time, and that was well worth the trouble.

Fully a score of times Evander Wright had passed around the little clump of timber to stare off over the plain in the direction taken by the two trailers, though he knew that it was worse than idle to look for them back so early. And twice as often had he searched the horizon on all sides for some sign of human life. Not that he hoped or wished to find it; just the contrary.

"But it'll come," he muttered, sullenly. "It never rains but it pours, an' bad luck runs in packs! It'll come—I know it jest as sart'in as though I see'd it down in Holy Writ!"

And yet, often as he looked, great as were his fears of just such a visitation, it remained for Otelia to first catch sight of a moving body, far away on the plain, in a direction almost at right angles with the course followed by the trail of the horse thieves.

Like every woman and child, almost to the babe in arms, who formed one of the number who longed so ardently for Oklahoma, Otelia knew how fatal to their hopes would be a meeting with either soldiers or army scouts, and the in-

stant she sighted this distant object, she gave vent to her suspicions in a sharp, startled cry that brought Evander Wright to her side, pale and uneasy.

"I knowed it!" came gratingly through his clinched teeth. "I said it never rains but it pours! I said bad luck never come alone. Them hounds hev smelt us out an' run us down! Ef the lads were here—ef it wasn't fer you wimmen, I'd—"

He bit the sentence short off, feeling how insanely foolish such an idea was, even in that moment of fierce madness. He knew that he dared not openly resist the representatives of the law, of the Government. He knew that he could do nothing but submit to being turned back from the Promised Land and escorted across the border into Kansas.

"Mebbe it ain't them," he muttered, as his sight grew less clear and the far-off body seemed to fade out like a fleecy cloud before the wind. "It don't look like it was—'Telie, your eyes is younger'n mine: look close an' tell me the plain truth!"

"It is a body of horsemen, father," was the reluctant reply.

"But they ain't comin' this way? They're jest ridin' on 'bout thar own business? They hain't see'd no smoke, an' we didn't come from that way to lay a trail fer 'em—an' what we did make the cyclone an' the rain blotted all out! Mebbe they won't sight us, ef—quick!" he cried, springing to the wagons and with trembling fingers essaying to loosen the snow-white tilts.

"They'll sight these kivers! Durn fools we fer not thinkin' o' that afore!"

"It's no use, father," said Otelia, her voice sharp and hard as she watched the approaching body of horsemen. "They've seen us before this, or else they're bound for this timber on some other errand. They're riding direct for this spot, at a gallop!"

Evander Wright glanced over his shoulder at this, and a single look convinced him that Otelia spoke no more than the truth. Already the little spot had spread into a blot thrice its size when first discovered, and even his passion-hot eyes could make out the figures of both men and horses.

A groan of bitter rage broke from his lips, and one hand dropped to the weapons at his belt as he wheeled and glared over the plain at the coming riders. Almost unconsciously he muttered:

"Ef I could! Ef I hed even the ghost of a right! I wouldn't be turned back now my foot is almost on the land that belongs by honest right to me an' mine!"

Inspired by the fighting-fire in his blazing eyes, Otelia sprang to the tent and came back with his Winchester in her hands.

"Take it, father, while I get the other!" she cried, her face pale as that of a corpse, but her voice ringing out clear and resolute. "We can beat them back—we can whip them, and not half try!"

She believed what she said, too, but her words brought Evander Wright back to his senses. The ghost of a smile flitted across his face as he took the weapon, drawing the spirited girl close to his side with his other hand, bending his head and pressing a gentle kiss upon her bare brow as he uttered:

"I wouldn't ax anythin' better then to try, 'Telie, pet, ef it wasn't fightin' ag'inst the Gov'ment. We can't do that, right or wrong, pet! We can't do nothin' harder than talk—an' mighty little that'll count with them critters!"

The maiden bent her head back, gazing intently up into his face. She saw that he meant all he said; saw that he was now as cool and collected as he had but a moment before been mad with reckless disappointment.

"And we must give up all our hopes!"

"Fer this time, little girl," with a flashing eye and quickly compressed lip. "They kin turn us back, but they can't keep us from tryin' it over ag'in an' still ag'in—from tryin' ontel we git thar at last! Even the Gov'ment that backs 'em up can't do that much!"

It was a poor consolation, but as it seemed to give the boomer a certain gloomy satisfaction, Otelia would say naught to banish it. She turned in silence to inspect the approaching party.

Beyond the possibility of a doubt, they had espied the little band of boomers, for they scattered out as though each man was eager to gain an unobstructed view of the camp. Or, as Evander Wright bitterly muttered:

"They want us to hev a chance to count 'em, so we kin see it ain't no use to kick ag'in the pricks! But ef it wasn't jest so—ef the Gov'ment wasn't standin' to thar backs—it ain't no ten men that could ride over even me by myself!"

"But, father!" cried Otelia, with a quick gasp, her great eyes filling with startled wonder as she gazed at the horsemen. "Those aren't soldiers! Look! not a blue coat among them all!"

Evander Wright showed his teeth sullenly, for he had already made the same discovery, and it gave him scant comfort.

"So much the wuss fer us, 'Telie," he growled, fingering his rifle nervously, temptation press-

ing hard upon him in his despair. "They're the houn'-dogs that runs the game down fer the soldiers. It's a gang o' what they call army scouts."

By this time less than a mile separated the two parties, and while the horsemen did not actually come to a halt, their progress slackened until their animals were walking. Either they felt confident of their game, since they could see that no horses were hitched to the wagons, or else they wanted to give the boomers plenty of time to think twice before making a rash move.

Evander Wright laughed harshly as he noticed this deliberation, for he naturally placed the least complimentary interpretation on it.

"It wouldn't be much of a job! Ef only the Gov'ment didn't back 'em up in it! Ef it was only atween man an' men! Wouldn't I?"

He seemed afraid to trust himself too far, for he thrust the Winchester into the nearest wagon, turning with empty hands to his wife and daughter who were watching the slow coming of the enemy.

"We can't do nothin' but submit, mother, an' keep on hopin' fer better luck next time. They won't be no fightin' nur even hard words, but you'd best take 'Telie an' go to the tent. You kin see an' hear everythin' jest as well, an' yit be out o' the way. Critters that make a livin' like they do, ain't apt to be any too whi e, or smooth-tongued. Go in thar with your mother, 'Telie—so!"

Meekly Mrs. Wright obeyed. All her life she had yielded to others, and it was not likely she would begin to rebel at this late day. And Otelia went with her, though reluctantly.

Her hand was claspin' the butt of a revolver that lay in her pocket. Her eyes were flashing, her lips tightly compressed. If she could have decided, those horsemen would only have gained the little camp through a storm of bullets.

"Hello, in thar!" cried one of the horsemen, suddenly spurring out in advance of his fellows, swinging a broad-brimmed hat above his head as he drew rein again a hundred yards or more from the wagons.

"I'm lookin' at ye, critter!" sullenly responded the boomer.

"That's all right, jest so you ain't squintin' over a gun," laughed the other, replacing his hat and slackening the reins, his horse slowly moving forward, the main body following after.

"Ef that's all, I kin 'commodate ye mighty quick!" was the retort as the boomer snatched the repeating rifle from the wagon where he had placed it. "You halt! Not a step furdur ontel you show your colors!"

"True blue—army blue, ef ye like it better," was the cool response, though the horseman reined in with admirable promptitude, throwing up an empty hand as he uttered the words.

"You ain't soldiers, by a mighty sight!" cried Evander Wright, feeling a faint satisfaction in the parley, though he never doubted the actual authority of these men.

"Not jest soldiers, but mighty nigh as good," with a short, reckless laugh that was echoed back by his comrades beyond. "Mebbe you never heard of Tom O'Donnell an' his scouts?"

"I never heard no good of 'em, anyhow!"

"Bein' a boomer, that's nat'al enough," with another laugh. "Men ain't apt fer ter see praise in the doin' of a duty that goes mighty hard ag'inst thar grain. I don't blame ye, pardner. I'd feel like kickin' my own self ef I was in your place. But kickin' won't git you any furdur this trip, an' you look too smart a man to make a bad matter wuss by raisin' a row that kin only hurt you—not us."

"Mebbe you'd see cause to change your 'pinion on that p'int, ef you didn't hev the hull Gov'ment at your back, Tom O'Donnell!"

"You wouldn't fight us?" with an echo of genuine surprise.

"I'd lick you *too* quick!" was the instant retort.

The horseman seemed doubly surprised, for this was not the manner of one who is idly blustering. He cast a keen, suspicious glance over the wagons as though suspecting an ambush, and involuntarily drew the head of his horse around and higher, as a partial protection to his own body.

"Whar's the rest of you, pardner?" he demanded, sharply.

"I'm the rest," was the prompt response, on the spur of the moment, though he could hardly hope to cover the fact that two other men belonged to the party. "Come in ef you've got to. I ain't fightin' the Gov'ment, though it's powerful temptin' when it keeps an honest man fer makin' a home fer his fam'ly!"

Ungracious as was the permission, the fellow who introduced himself as Tom O'Donnell, then the chief of the scouts employed by the army in searching out and turning back invaders, did not wait for a more cordial one. A motion of his hand brought up his fellows, and then he led the way into the camp, alighting before the boomer, extending a bony hand with a grin of good-humor on his gaunt features.

But Evander Wright shook his head doggedly as he refused the proffered member.

"I ain't got naught ag'in' you as a man,

stranger," he said, coldly, as he replaced his rifle in the wagon, then gazed fully into the face of the scout. "I'd as soon grip your paw as any other, ef we met under different circumstances. But you cain't expect me to fall in love with the man who stops me from takin' up my honest rights."

The smile faded from the gaunt face of the scout as he listened, and even before he uttered a word, Evander Wright realized his folly in showing his sentiments so plainly. For himself he cared little or nothing, but he should have been more thoughtful of those who depended upon him alone, just then.

"All right, mister man," grunted the scout, showing his yellow, wolfish teeth as he spoke, and a vicious glitter coming into his black eyes. "Ef you want it rough-shod, you kin hev it! Whar's your critters staked out at? Git 'em up an' hitched-to in a hurry! We hain't got no time to waste over men like you. Lively, now!"

"Mebbe you know best whar the stock is gone," sullenly retorted the boomer, his hot temper again getting the best of his judgment. "They was run off last night by a dirty cur that called himself Jerry Viggles. Mebbe you know him?"

Tom O'Donnell—to give him the name he laid claim to—showed his teeth again, a hot flush showing how hard the sneer had hit him.

"Look here, my fine fellow," and the bony forefinger shook before the white face of the boomer. "Don't you git too durn smart. It's a mighty thankless job we've got, at the best. It's our orders to make things as easy on you boomers as we kin, handy; but we ain't bound to chaw everything you see fit to throw in our faces. An' when a man like you runs in our road, blowin' an' snarlin', it's better'n a feast in famine time; fer we try to even up all we owe on him."

Evander Wright said nothing, feeling that he had already gone too far for the good of the helpless ones dependent upon him. But Tom O'Donnell was not so easily placated, and at a word from him his men scattered about the clump of timber, looking for sign, as it seemed.

"I know you, Evander Wright," the chief of scouts added, his tones hard and almost brutal. "I've had one eye open for you this month past. I heard that you made your brags about how you was goin' to git thar in spite of our teeth, an'—"

"Whoever said that lied!" growled the boomer. "Would I be sech a fool as to ax you critters to hunt me out? Not any!"

"All the same, I know you, an' I've bin huntin' fer you a good month; you an' that slippery Oklahoma Nick, as he calls himself. Whar is he right now?" with sudden sharpness, bending forward and staring keenly into the face of the boomer, as though expecting to catch him in an evasion, if not a flat lie.

"Gone to hunt up our stolen stock."

"An' the young feller went with him, eh?" casting a sharp glance around the camp, his gaunt face lighting up a little as he saw the two women standing near the tent, pale and anxious. "That's more o' your hard luck. We hain't got time to waste waitin' fer them, an'—"

"I cain't move without hosses, kin I?" growled Wright, angrily.

"That ain't my lookout. My orders is to arrest an' turn back all trespassers on this land. You ain't no red-skin, nor them ain't no squaws. You come without law or reason, an' you kin go back the same way."

"I cain't go without hosses. When they come, I'll go, not fer you or your men, but because the Government is back o' you. Only fer that—"

Evander Wright clicked his teeth sharply as he bit off the hot, reckless words that leaped up in his throat. Bound as were his hands, he must not say all he felt.

Tom O'Donnell laughed harshly, sneeringly.

"You'll travel when I give the word, old man, or—well, I'm better on the do then I be on the talk. As fer hosses—"

"You've g t to hitch on some o' yours, then, ef you won't wait fer the boys to git back with oun."

"As fer hosses, you kin tote enough plunder on your back to last you fur's you'll git with that akyfortis tongue o' yours, old man! I set out to treat you white, but you wouldn't hev it. You stuck up your nose at my hand. It wasn't good enough fer you to tetch. All right! I say you've got to git up an' git, hosses or no hosses! An' what you cain't tote on your back, we'll see that no other boomer don't git, ef we hev to make a bonfire to save it! Now you want to—"

His speech was cut short by a shrill scream, coming from near the little tent, where Otelia and her mother were anxiously watching the interview between Evander Wright and the chief of scouts.

One of the men, a burly, ruffianly-looking rascal, whose inflamed countenance and reddened eyes proclaimed him more than half-drunk, suddenly came around the tent from the rear, and catching Otelia about the waist, bent he forcibly backward, trying to press his foul mouth to hers.

Evander Wright wheeled on his heel as that piercing shriek of mingled terror and anger

came to his ears, and as he saw his beloved child struggling in the grasp of a ruffian, he whipped forth a revolver and sent a bullet crashing through the rascal's brain!

And so swiftly following that it seemed but an echo of his shot, Tom O'Donnell fired at the boomer, who flung up his arms and fell headlong, almost at the feet of his wife and daughter.

O'Donnell strode forward, cocking his weapon as though to make his foul work sure, but Otelia, freed from her insulter, sprung across the body of her father, thrusting a revolver before her. And though the chief of scouts flinched, ducking his head, he reeled back at her shot, uttering a sharp curse of angry pain.

CHAPTER XL.

A DETECTIVE OUTWITTED.

THERE are very few of us without our weaknesses, and fewer still who do not relish the idea of "taking down" those who have held themselves on a slightly higher plane. Henry Hornkohl was not one of the wondrous few whom nature made perfect at the start, and though Boomer Balt had been anything but severe in his reign, as guide, in comparison with the generality of the guild, he had naturally treated his employer much as a schoolmaster regards a pupil. Therefore, when Boomer Balt seemed driven to his wits' end and wholly at a loss what course to pursue, Henry Hornkohl would have been a little more than mortal if he had not felt a certain grim pleasure in keeping the veteran on the tenter-hooks of doubt and incredulity for a time.

It was amusing to watch the old fellow—as watch him the lawyer did through his nearly closed lids as he lay smoking lazily in the early morning while the guide prepared breakfast. It was amusing to note his puzzled, doubting countenance as he stole shy glances in that direction; as he would stop short in his work at times, to sniff and snort and shake his head, now dubiously, now decidedly.

Whatever these doubts may have been, they were speedily dispersed after the morning meal was disposed of.

Henry Hornkohl sought another interview with Lieutenant Ballingal, which resulted in a triangular consultation with Tom O'Donnell as the third member. Then, while the chief of scouts called some of his men together, Hornkohl hustled about the wrecked camp, finally securing a fairly good saddle-horse, whose owner was lying flat on his back with a broken leg.

"It's the best I can do, old fellow," said Hornkohl as he turned the animal over to Boomer Balt. "Get ready for the road at once, will you? We can do no good here, and the sooner we start the quicker we'll be likely to find the Wright family."

"Blowed onto 'em! Told the sojer! Goin' to hunt 'em up—long of a passel o' scouts! Waal, I will be durned to durnation!"

Boomer Balt seemed stunned, and wholly unable to comprehend what object his employer had in acting after this fashion. A dozen times while engaged in preparing his horse for the road his mouth flew open as he stared at the lawyer, but as often it closed with an audible click, the almost-spoken question remaining unborn.

Henry Hornkohl saw all this, and really enjoyed it, though his countenance never betrayed the fact. He saw that Boomer Balt was suffering torments, and though he was not naturally of a malicious disposition, he carefully kept him in suspense through the preparations, through the brisk ride that lasted until high noon.

Lieutenant Ballingal told off half a dozen soldiers, and added to them four of the scouts, leaving the choice of the latter to their own chief, and bidding the privates consider themselves under command of the scout designated by Tom O'Donnell to fill that office.

"Good luck go with you, my dear sir," he said, cordially, crossing palms with the lawyer as the little squad were in readiness for a start. "I'd send O'Donnell with you, but I've got other work for him. You can trust these honest lads: I'd back any one of them to charge through fire and brimstone if their duty lay on the other side!"

"It'll hardly come to that, I reckon," laughed Hornkohl, lightly. "From all accounts this Wright is a smart fellow, but I hardly think he'll fight when we corner him. You'll see us heading this way before many days, with a mighty meek-faced boomer begging for an army escort back across the border."

And all through that forenoon ride, Henry Hornkohl seemed to find a particular delight in flinging out some such scrap as this. If one was to believe his speech, there never lived a more rabid "protectionist" as far as the Oklahoma country was concerned. Each and every boomer was a criminal of deepest dye. Instead of being simply escorted back across the border, there to be set at liberty to make another attempt to successfully break the law, they deserved close confinement at the hardest kind of hard labor!

Naturally enough both the soldiers and the

scouts were strongly prejudiced against the invaders, for this life was hardly as agreeable as lying idly in garrison, but Henry Hornkohl far distanced each and every one of the little squad in his denunciations of the trespassers.

Boomer Balt rode along in the rear, the picture of dejection and doubt. Now and then his face would lighten up as the lawyer bore down particularly heavy on the boomers; this was in such strong contrast to the opinions which he had expressed during their earlier association, that the guide tried to believe his employer was playing a part; was seeking to throw the enemy off their guard, the more surely to escape the trap into which they had fallen.

"Durn it all!" he muttered, shaking his head helplessly. "I cain't hev mistook so fur as that! He's white—he ain't sech a cur! He wouldn't sell 'em out! But—double-durned ef it don't git me!"

Henry Hornkohl turned in his saddle with a low, mocking laugh, as though his keen ears had caught this muttering. Boomer Balt stared at him almost appealingly, but that smiling face turned away without reply.

The little band was not moving at random. The country to the east of the wrecked camp had been pretty thoroughly scouted over, and it was tolerably certain that, as Evander Wright had attempted to slip through the lines alone, he would try to keep off the most frequented routes.

On comparing notes, Tom O'Donnell decided that the party must have kept to the west, as all trails in the other direction had been investigated and those who made them accounted for. And acting by his advice the soldiers kept with the two civilians, while the four scouts spread out to cover as much ground as possible, looking keenly for signs.

When noon came the party stopped for dinner. It was not a forced march they were taking, and under such circumstances men of their caliber are not apt to forget or neglect their rations.

Henry Hornkohl saw that Boomer Balt had taken on a dogged, resolute expression as though he was determined to reach some definite understanding before going further; and as he felt that he had pretty well wiped off all scores, the lawyer even went a little out of his way to bring about this amicable settlement.

"Own up that I'm not nearly such a slouch as you put me down for at the jump-off, Uncle Balt," he laughed as, their hasty meal disposed of, he dropped down beneath a tree which stood some little distance from where the remainder of the party were eating and resting.

"I'm free to own you ain't jest the sort I tuck ye fer," slowly uttered the guide.

Hornkohl laughed softly, his dark eyes snapping again at this cautious reply—one that could be read backward and forward.

"You admitted that you couldn't see a way out of the trap into which we run our heads. You as good as threw up your hand when Tom O'Donnell came in and recognized you. You admit that, pard?"

"Waal, I ain't sayin' you're so mighty fur off the track, but, why in time did you sell out Vander Wright? That's what's puzzlin' me heap the wust. You, the very critter that ought to stick up fer him an' them the hardest! To sell 'em out like that! To not even wait fer a question, but to jump right in an'—good Lord!"

The veteran fairly choked with utter disgust. But Henry Hornkohl only laughed more lightly than before.

"Why not, since it is for his own good? Why not, since I want to lring him back to enjoy something far better than he can ever hope to gain in this country, even if he could be assured of being permitted to take his pick and remain undisturbed. But that, as you are old enough to know, is altogether out of the question. Some day the country will be opened for settlement, of course, but until then the Government will surely see that the law, as such, is respected."

"Mebbe yes, mebbe no. I con't give a coper fer it either way, jest now," was the grumbling retort. "What gits me, is—"

"How I soft-sawdred the gallant lieutenant?" smiled the lawyer. "Simply enough, dear fellow. I just showed him a bit of paper, signed and countersigned, whose authority he recognized and admitted. Some day I'll make you just as wise. For the present—listen."

"While Evander Wright is seeking his fortune in this direction, he is running right away from a much greater and more certain one. Now what are you grinning about?" with a start and a frown, as he noticed the peculiar light that flashed across the face of the guide.

"Was I grinnin'?" with an innocent uplifting of his white brows. "Waal, nebbe I was thinkin' of the old sayin' 'thar's tricks in all trades but ours.' But never mind me, lad. I'm only a ole fool. Go on."

Henry Hornkohl was serious enough now, and he gazed keenly, almost suspiciously at the guide, who was placidly smiling at vacancy. This was not the first time a stray word or two had startled the lawyer, as he claimed to be. More than once he had caught himself wondering if Boomer Balt was just what he represented himself. More than once he suspected that the old fellow was keeping something back, was

playing a part for some especial purpose, and now this suspicion returned with doubled force.

And yet—what was he, if not Boomer Balt? That he was not disguised, in the common acceptance of that term, Hornkohl well knew, for one evening when his suspicions were strongest, and the guide was soundly sleeping, he had assured himself that that white hair and beard were natural growth, not artificial.

Boomer Balt swiftly lifted his eyes and flashed a mocking, malicious glance into the puzzled face before him, chuckling:

"Mebbe they ain't no sech slouch on *this* side o' the fence, nuther, pardner! Mebbe the ole man kin shout louder than a whisper ef he was to 'zert himself 'way up! Mebbe he mought flash out a dockymint or two, when the right time comes! Mebbe, mind ye! An' mebbe he's jest tryin' to stuff ye with wind, though they *do* say it takes a devil to fool a lawyer-man!"

"You know more about the Wright family than you care to admit; I see that much!"

"Why shouldn't I know 'em, when—but don't let me interrupt ye, pard," with a light wave of his hand. "You was doin' the talkin'."

"Story for story, or my mouth closes like a clam, old man!"

"Age afore beauty, ye know, pard! Mebbe I'd say too much ef I was to talk fu'st. Some men don't want the hull truth let out. I ain't sayin' you're one o' them men, though. Don't take it that way."

With an effort Henry Hornkohl drove the frown from his face, resuming his careless attitude, his voice smooth and cool as before.

"I'll unriddle your sphinx when I have more time to waste; one thing at a time is good enough for me. As for secrets, all men who follow my profession have secrets, more or less important. I am not an exception to the general rule, though I doubt very much whether you could lay a finer tip on a single one. But let that go for now."

"I told you I was a lawyer; lie number one!"

"I knowed that from pritty nigh the fu'st," was the dry retort.

"Indeed!" with a half sneer. "Perhaps I'd save breath were I to let you tell my little story!"

"Mebbe you would, an' mebbe I wouldn't make so awful many mistakes in the doin' of it, nuther," with a smile. "Mebbe I could tell why you wanted to ketch up with 'Vander Wright in sech a hurry. Or—what's the name o' the little gal that's with 'Vander?"

"Otelia, I believe. Curious name, rather. Seems to run in the family to deal in curious or odd names. Evander, Permelia, Otelia, Pericles!"

"An Onesiphorus—don't fergit Uncle Oney, pard," drawled Boomer Balt, smiling placidly as he half closed his eyes.

Henry Hornkohl started, with something that sounded suspiciously like an oath crossing his lips as he sat erect with eyes glowing.

"What do *you* know about Onesiphorus Wright?"

"Know that it was 'long o' him that all them funny names was giv' 'Vander Wright an' the rest. Know that Uncle Oney is too mighty rich to see straight. Know that he is—"

"Was you mean," laughed the lawyer, falling back to his former position like one who again feels himself above water.

Boomer Balt smiled still more placidly as he crossed both hands behind his head, slowly rocking back and forward, his nearly closed eyes sparkling through their heavy lashes.

"Never take back nothin', pard. *Is* I said, an' *is* I stick to!"

"Was I said, and *was* I can prove," laughed the lawyer, just as positively. "Onesiphorus Wright is dead and buried, long ago!"

"I want to know," drawled Boomer Balt, arching his brows. "Bet a dollar it's a false report. Bet a dollar Uncle Oney ain't no deader'n I be. Bet two dollars I don't keer a darn! So go on, pard."

A startled look came into the face of the other, and he stared intently, almost breathlessly into the face of his guide. But then, with a short laugh of contempt at his own folly, he cast aside that preposterous suspicion and resumed:

"Dead or not dead, Onesiphorus Wright has made his will and left an enormous fortune to Evander Wright and his heirs. I carry a copy of that will in my breast-pocket, with other important papers."

"Make interestin' readin', no doubt, but hardly wuth gittin' so turribly 'cited over, seem' a will ain't much 'count long's the man who makes it is still in the land o' the livin', stout an' hearty."

"Old Wright is not living, I tell you. I've seen his grave. I've talked with those who helped to bury him. I am hired by his lawyers, or those who were his lawyers when he was alive, to find those whom he left his fortune to: Evander Wright and his family."

Boomer Balt pursed up his lips, but it was a silent whistle. And the words he uttered seemed intended solely for his own ears:

"Go 'way from home to l'arn the news! Dead

an' buried, eh? Then I'd like to know who on airth— Eh?"

"Who on earth *you* are?" echoed Hornkohl. "So would I!"

"Balthus Carr, better knowed as Boomer Balt, beca'se— Hello!" with a gentle grin that slowly stole all over his face. "Anythin' bit you, pard?"

"Just a lump of dirt sticking in between two ribs," was the careless reply, as Hornkohl shifted his position for one that seemed to suit him better. "But as I was saying: I came out here to hunt up the legal heirs of Onesiphorus Wright, deceased. That was nearly nine months ago, and—"

"Only so long?" murmured Boomer Balt, in languid surprise.

"That was my first trip, which had a rather peculiar ending. As we have time enough, perhaps it may interest you to learn just what I mean by that."

"Ef I go to sleep, jest ram me with your toe, pard; I'm turribly interested—turribly!"

"Though the will and its contents were perfectly plain and easy to understand, there was a hitch when it came to looking up the heirs. Beyond a general statement that Evander Wright had gone out to one of the Western States, we had no clew. Advertising failed, and finally the firm of lawyers who had charge of the estate, applied to the chief for a good man who would take the job of finding Evander Wright. The chief detailed me, and receiving my instructions, I set to work."

"The clew was not very definite, you see, but I was young and enthusiastic in my profession. I knew that it would take time and money, but I was paid for the one, and plentifully supplied with the other, so I borrowed scant trouble on that score."

"Never mind all I did or tried to do. Enough that I followed up one or two wild clews, that ended in nothing to serve us. Until I hit Kansas City. You've been there?"

Boomer Balt nodded assent.

"Then you know how it is yourself, perhaps. Not very ancient; not quite so big as some other cities; but with more fun and racket and pure devil than would serve all the rest put together!"

"Well, while feeling my way the best I knew how, loafing about the stock-yards and other points where the grangers most do congregate, not sparing my tongue in my eagerness to catch some trace of a long-lost relative named Wright, I run across a likely young fellow whom I first heard hailed as Oklahoma Nick."

"Nick Van Bibber: the critter that's leadin' 'Vander Wright to the happy land—jes' so," muttered Boomer Balt.

"The very same man," nodded the detective, with a faint show of white, strong teeth and a smile that was fully as much tiger as man. "He said he knew several persons by the name of Wright, and though none of them happened to be the man I wanted most, according to *his* tell, we grew uncommon thick before night descended over the peaceful earth. And when it did fall—when it came down good all around, far enough to be tucked up on all sides—Oklahoma Nick and your servant were taking in the town, with all that term implies."

"Kinder sloppin' over the paint-bucket. I've bin thar—when I was a leetle mite younger, ye understand!"

"It wasn't altogether a longing for wild oats that led me so far astray, mind you," resumed the detective, growing more grave. "Somehow, as though instinctively, I felt that this dashing cowboy was playing me for roots. Somehow I doubted his truth when he said that he could tell me nothing of Evander Wright. Yet he seemed honest enough, too!"

"One o' the sort that kin whistle a crow off its roost—don't I know the p'izen critter?" snapped Boomer Balt, his eyes all aglow.

"Something like that," nodded the detective, his eyes half-closed but keenly observing every change in the face opposite him. "I could give no reason for doubting him, but doubt him I did, and when I accepted his invitation to 'do the town,' it was purely for the purpose of setting that suspicion at rest, one way or another."

"I didn't think it would bother me much. I've got a head on me t'ou h as a pine-knot; if I hadn't, I wouldn't be here now! And I knew I could carry double the sail that would send Oklahoma Nick to bottom, head-foremost."

"But you slipped up on it, of course! Most al'ays that way!"

"I kept an eye in that direction, but somehow I got a dose that sent me wild. I was drugged, and then slugged—*bad!* The police picked me up, and turned me over to the hospital. They searched me for some clew to my identity first, of course, but found nothing. Though I had all my papers and wealth with me when I set out on that racket, never a scrap of writing nor a red cent was there on me when I was picked up."

"For good six months I lay there in hospital, just alive, and that was all. I never spoke an intelligible word during all that time. I was helpless as a child, and my mind an utter blank. Then an operation of some sort was risked—it

meant life or death—and I came back to life once more."

"Even then, it was weeks before I could leave hospital. I had time enough to think it all over while lying there awaiting the reply from my employers, to whom I sent word the first day I was permitted to touch pen and ink. I felt almost certain that Oklahoma Nick slugged me, either to get hold of my papers or my wealth. And yet, I could not remember telling him anything about the will, or just why I was hunting up Evander Wright. If I mentioned either, it must have been done while the drug was taking effect."

"Still, who else would have taken my papers? And why did not this friendly cowboy come forward when my case was published in the papers to give what information lay in his power?"

"Beca'se he didn't hev to," murmured Boomer Balt, with a faint smile. "Beca'se he'd got all he wanted out o' you, an' was off 'to cook other fish!"

"That's easy enough to believe, knowing what I have since found out," added the detective. "But just then it bothered me not a little to cipher it all out. If he had sent word to my employers, offering to put them on the right track of the missing heirs, for a consideration, I could have understood his animus easily enough. Instead—as you hint, he was playing a much bolder game."

"My employers sent me money and fresh copies, bidding me stick to the case and carry it to a successful ending. You see, they had taken quite a fancy to me, and knew that if I did succeed, it would go a long way toward giving me a lift in my profession."

"An' so you tuck to huntin' up the record of Oklahoma Nick, which ended in fetchin' you out thar whar we run up ag'inst each other," tersely uttered the guide, like one who is wearying of a story too long drawn out for an outsider.

"Precisely," nodded Hornkohl, nothing put out. "And right there I got at the bottom facts of the case, as I still believe. Oklahoma Nick knew the Wright family. He was already in love with the daughter, and knowing from my papers that she was bound to come in for a right snug little fortune when—"

"When the ole man kicks the bucket!"

"Still harping on that string?" with a swift frown.

"Dummed ef I don't keep on fergittin' that Uncle Oney's *dead*—dead an' buried fer keeps! Mighty queer—most mighty queer!" with a husky sound that might easily be mistaken for a stifled chuckle.

"An' that you couldn't stan', nohow—which I don't blame ye fer one bit, Mau—pardner," with a hasty correction that did not escape the watchful detective, whose brows contracted still more.

"Boot an' saddle, lads!" called out the scout in charge of the party at that juncture, and Boomer Balt sprang eagerly to his feet.

"Keep your easy, pardner," he said hastily, as the detective rose to his feet. "I'll saddle up fer you, an' you kin finish your pipe."

"You're too willing, Uncle Balt," said the detective with a peculiar smile. "Our bags stand close together, like good friends, and you can finish what you set out to say while saddling up."

"Did I—dummed ef I hain't got the best forgettery in seventeen States!" drawled the guide with a faint, uneasy smile.

"You started to call me by a name which I have never claimed, though I imagine it is not altogether strange to me."

"Mebbe you hev, pardner," that faint smile deepening.

"I heard of Maurice North, up yonder in Nebraska, while investigating the record of Oklahoma Nick. He was tried and found guilty of murdering one George Humphrey, I believe?"

"Mebbe he was. Mebbe that was the name I started to call ye. But never git mad fer a slip o' the tongue like that, pard! I'm older then I used to was, an' ain't nigh so sure o' my tongue. Mebbe the fastenin's is wore loose, like, ye know!"

Henry Hornkohl gazed steadily into the face of his guide, his own countenance a curious study. He seemed so thoroughly puzzled. He seemed half-annoyed, half-angry with the old fellow.

"Once before you called me by that name, and stared into my face as though you thought to catch me tripping. Why? Do you mean to say that you really believe I am this murderer, Maurice North?"

"I don't b'lieve he *was* a murderer!" slowly replied Boomer Balt, steadily meeting that keen gaze. "I don't b'lieve he done what they all said he done—all but 'Tefie Wright! *She* stuck to the lad, through thick an' thin! *She* never tuck no stock into it—an' I'm most mighty glad to know that, now Nick Van Bibber is grown so mighty thick with the party."

"One would almost be tempted to think you had a personal interest in this young lady," slowly uttered Henry Hornkohl, his eyes glowing.

"An' why not?" sturdily retorted the guide, though with just the ghost of a smile about his lips, that as quickly faded away. "I know

Nick Van Bibber to be a dirty rascal. I know the gal to come of good an' true stock. I know—that ef we stan' chatterin' here all day, we'll git mighty bad left by the boys—so we will, pard!"

"Saddle up, then. But mind you, old fellow, you and I have got to have another little confab together before long. I've made a clean breast to you, and you've got to be as frank. I don't think either of us will lose anything by being open and aboveboard."

"Lord love ye, pard! All you've said is sacred an' secret—as secret as it would be ef you'd hauled me out o' my grave to whisper in the ear o' me! Jest as secret—secret as a dead man, pard!"

Boomer Balt chuckled and grinned as he hurried up his preparations for the trail. He seemed immensely tickled over something. And the keen-eared detective could just catch muttered scraps in which he could detect the words "grave," "dead man," "secret," and the like.

"If I didn't know Onesiphorus Wright was dead and buried, bless me if I wouldn't almost—bah! Old man, you're growing crazy!"

CHAPTER XII.

DOWN THE CANYON.

FOR a single breath Oklahoma Nick stood as though petrified, staring wild-eyed at the point where he had last seen Pericles Wright. That frightful death-shriek rung in his ears until, with a shudder, he clapped both hands to his head to drown the blood-curdling cry.

The action was involuntary, but it served one good purpose; the spell was broken, and with a low, shuddering cry he sprang forward, pausing on the very brink of the canyon, gazing down into the dizzy depths where the young giant had fallen.

Oklahoma Nick seemed to forget his own peril in his anxiety for his comrade. He did not cast a glance about him, though at least two of the murderous rascals must still be nigh at hand.

Over the nearly perpendicular precipice he glared, white-faced and unnerved. Looked over, only to draw back with a sudden shivering that actually made his strong teeth click together. And with a trembling hand tight clasped over his eyes, he reeled unsteadily, only saving himself from falling by clutching a slender sapling close by.

Strong man though he was, before his eyes stood out the terrible picture that had greeted them; the young giant reeling on the verge of that deep cleft, apparently crippled by the treacherous shot, yet claiming his vengeance even in death—for death it surely must mean!

Almost perpendicular the descent, without ledge or bush or growing tree to break the fall. Death—death beyond all possibility of hope!

With a desperate effort Oklahoma Nick flung off the dizzy faintness which had attacked him when he gazed over the escarpment. He must act—he must do what there remained to do, without loss of time.

"I've got to do it!" he forced himself to utter, starting at the hoarse, unnatural sound of his voice—so unlike his usual tones that he glanced swiftly around, a hand dropping to his belt of arms. "I've got to find—what's left! I'll have to tell them—tell her!"

He was creeping toward the spot where Pericles Wright fell over into the canyon, but he paused, shivering anew as he thought of Otelia Wright and the manner in which she would receive the terrible tidings which he must bear to her.

"That's the worst of it all!" he muttered, hoarsely, his face pale and filled with a haunting doubt.

Would she not hold him accountable for the death of her brother? Could he ever convince her of his guiltlessness?

His gaze fell upon the red drops that sprinkled the top of a flat white stone, and with the curious attention to details which sometimes characterizes one who is forced to investigate a tragedy against his will, Oklahoma Nick lent over the marks, even touching one after another with his unsteady finger-tip.

"He was hit—hit hard, too!" he muttered, following the bloody trail as it neared the escarpment. "Shot through and through—he was so close! He was hurt too bad to suffer much. Maybe he couldn't fairly realize it—maybe he never really knew he was falling. Maybe that awful screech—"

The blood-spots led him to the edge of the canyon, and lying flat on his stomach, fearing for his steadiness of brain after all that had transpired, Oklahoma Nick gazed downward into the gloomy depths.

Right below him, where the face of the canyon wall sloped outward a little, was a red smear on the white rock. The wounded giant must have struck there, as he toppled over with his assassin struggling vainly in his grasp.

Only that to tell of the awful tragedy! Not a sound from the bottom of the canyon. Not a cry, not a moan. Nothing to tell of the fate which had overtaken Pericles Wright and the ruffian who tried to murder him!

Oklahoma Nick drew back, shuddering, pale in the face as one at the point of death. Never

while his life endured could he forget what he had undergone during those brief minutes.

"No use—no use to call!" he muttered, turning his back to the death canyon, his eyes roving over the broken ground beyond, where the two ruffians whom he had put to flight had vanished.

Strange as it may sound, nevertheless it is true that the guide never gave them even a single thought during those first few minutes. His every faculty was bound up in Pericles Wright, his horrible doom, the necessity of searching for his remains, and—worst of all, as it seemed to him just then—bearing the terrible news back to the camp where the unfortunate lad's relatives awaited his return.

He loved Otelia Wright so passionately. He had set his entire hopes on winning her for his wife. And now, to have to meet her face to face with such awful words on his lips!

"But it's got to be done—I've got to do it!" he muttered, one hand brushing swiftly across his eyes as he moved back to the point where he was sitting when the ambush was opened upon them.

With his package of food, was a pint flask of whisky, as yet untouched. He hesitated an instant as he caught up the bottle.

"If he's alive—if he shouldn't be quite dead!" flashed through his busy brain; but the very idea was so wildly improbable that he banished it on the instant.

He drank freely, and in a brief space felt that it was a wise act on his part. Already his brain was growing clearer, his nerves more steady as the fiery liquor tingled through his system.

"I need it—I'll need all the help it can give me, too!" he muttered as he hastily secured the scattered food, tying it up again for ready carriage. "An hour ago I'd have laughed at the idea of being so completely broken up by the death of any one man—even of his!"

He rose erect, slinging the small package of food behind his back and securing it where it would not interfere with the free use of his arms. And as he did so, his mechanically roving eyes suddenly made out the head and shoulders of a human being at some little distance. At a glance he recognized one of the rascals who had assailed him, and after a barely perceptible hesitation, he caught up his repeating rifle and sent a shot humming in that direction.

He saw the bullet knock a little shower of splinters from the frost-eaten rock close beside the head, but knew that his shot had been wasted for vengeance as he caught a glimpse of the fellow dodging from rock to rock in headlong flight.

Rapidly as he could manipulate the weapon, Oklahoma Nick sent shot after shot whistling in pursuit, leaping forward in chase to pause for a snap-shot whenever a glimpse was caught of the fugitive. But his very eagerness to make sure seemed to frustrate his fierce hopes. The frightened rascal fled on, and was soon after lost from sight entirely.

Oklahoma Nick spent some minutes in searching for the fellow, but then reluctantly desisted. There was a still more important duty before him, which he dared no longer neglect.

"I've got to get down there, somehow!" he muttered, his brows contracting and his face paling again as he slowly retraced his steps. "It's got to be done, though I'd give a year of my life if I could let out the job!"

Once more he stood at the point where the young giant had fallen over into the canyon, staring down into the gloomy depths. He seemed trying to decide to which hand he had better turn. For where he now was, a safe descent to the bottom was clearly out of the question.

A slow, searching survey of the lay of the ground around at length decided him, and turning to the left, he strode rapidly along the edge of the canyon, believing that in this direction he would be able to reach the bottom of the defile the sooner.

Now that he was taking positive action, Oklahoma Nick looked more like his usual self. His face was still pale. There was a tinge of blood in his dark eyes, and dark circles beneath them. There was a worn and almost haggard look about his face that told how violent had been his emotions. But his movements were swift and certain, and that peculiar shivering troubled him no more.

For fully a mile he proceeded without finding a point where descent to the bottom of the canyon was at all practicable, but having wasted so much time, he dared not think of retracing his steps to look in the opposite direction.

"It must come soon," he muttered, searching the prospect ahead, where the rocky plateau seemed to grow lower and to break up into miniature mountains.

He proved to be right in this, for shortly afterward he reached a spot where a break in the canyon wall enabled him to trace a course from top to bottom, though one that would call for a cool head and steady nerves to avert accident.

"I've lost too much time already!" he muttered, slinging his rifle over his shoulders by the strap with which it was provided. "If I do break my neck—small loss to humanity! And I won't have to carry the news to her!"

More than one slip, caused by the weather-weakened rock giving way beneath his weight, showed the dangerous nature of that descent, but perhaps that very recklessness proved the man's best safeguard. There was no hesitation. No pausing to gather nerve. No faltering doubt when a step was once selected. And winding up with a scrambling plunge in which a shower of frost-eaten rocks came rattling down, Oklahoma Nick landed safely at the bottom of the canyon.

Without pausing to catch his breath or to rest his strained limbs, the guide turned and hastened up the canyon in the direction where poor Perry Wright had fallen with his assassin. And ten minutes later he uttered a low, strained ejaculation that told his journey was ended.

There was more than horror or grief in that ejaculation.

Though he knew he stood almost directly below the point from whence Perry Wright had fallen, Oklahoma Nick had not yet caught sight of his comrade or his remains. For a dense mass of scrubby bushes, covered over with a thick mat of wild grape-vines filled the bottom of the canyon from side to side. And at one point he saw where the vines had been torn apart, where the bushes had been splintered and crushed out of shape, as though by a heavy weight falling upon them from above!

The bushes were so plainly visible from where he stood, that Oklahoma Nick cast a bewildered glance upward, almost convinced that he had mistaken the point. Surely he must have seen and recognized such a mass of foliage from the top of the canyon wall?

Doubtless it was the difference of light as seen from the two stand-points. Certain it is that he had not noticed any such growth when above. Equally certain it was that this was the point where Perry Wright had fallen when attacked by the assassin.

"Mayoe he's still alive! Maybe it didn't kill him outright!"

Gasping came the words. And pale as death himself, Oklahoma Nick leaned against the rock wall for support, fairly holding his breath as he listened for a sound from the broken scrub.

Was that a moan? Was that a dying gasp?

With a choking breath the guide fought down his emotions and sprang forward, tearing aside the clinging vines, crushing back the stiff and stubborn limbs, making his way to the point where he knew all his painful doubts would be solved.

He was forced to drop to his hands and knees before he reached the point where his companion had crushed through the matted cushion wrought by the cunning fingers of Nature. And on his hands and knees he was when a mass of vines came away in his grasp, leaving him face to face with the young giant.

Or his remains.

Scratched and marked with blood. Long, curling locks of yellow hair all a-tangle. Jaws firmly set, just showing the strong white teeth through the slightly parted lips: parted in a smile that even now contained a threat!

For a brief space Oklahoma Nick seemed like one suddenly p-trified, staring into that handsome, yet horrifying face. For, to his sorely strained fancy, it seemed a face that was mutely accusing him of murder!

Yet not a muscle stirred. Had the face been carved out of marble, it could not have been more immobile than now.

Shaken as he was, Oklahoma Nick noticed that Perry Wright had fallen uppermost, and that even yet those mighty arms were tight-wrapped about the corpse of the assassin. He could only catch a glimpse of the latter, but that was enough to show him death. His head was doubled beneath his body, lying in an ugly pool of blood. Beyond a doubt his neck was broken.

Then—a cry gurgled up in the throat of Oklahoma Nick as Perry Wright opened his eyes and stared vacantly into the face of the guide.

With that wild yell of sudden superstition, Oklahoma Nick scrambled backward, trembling from crown to sole, cold sweat starting out in great drops on his ghastly face. And only for a tangle of vines that tripped him up as he started to his feet, it is almost certain that he would have fled down the canyon at top speed, so intense was his fright.

He fell heavily, striking his temple on a stone, cutting a gash to the bone and drawing blood freely. He lay shivering for a brief space before staggering to his feet, almost blinded with blood.

The flow seemed to do him good. It seemed to relieve the terrible pressure upon his brain, and it took but a few moments to recall his manhood. Then, instead of fleeing from the corpse that opened its eyes in mute accusation, he drew his knife and began cutting a passage to the spot where Perry Wright lay—living, not dead!

He knew that, now. And he worked with a desperation that in a marvelously brief time opened a way to the luckless giant.

Those great blue eyes were closed, now, but as Oklahoma Nick gently touched the blood—

stained face, he fancied he could detect signs of life still lingering there.

With his knife he cut away the vines and bushes until he formed a rude sort of couch close to the wall of the canyon. And then, using his great physical powers with as much care as the nature of the task would admit, he dragged the young giant off from the mangled corpse to which, in a great measure, he had owed his escape from instant death.

Not until Perry Wright was stretched on this couch of vines and limbs, did Oklahoma Nick dare pause to examine into the nature of the injuries he had received in that frightful fall. Even then he hesitated, like one who dreads to confirm his worst fears. Something of that old horror seemed to seize upon him, and he fell to shivering, trembling like a leaf. His face was pale as that of a corpse, save where marked by the blood that still trickled from the gash on his temple. His lips were ashen gray, dry and parched. His breath came in short, quick gasps. He shrunk back, uttering a low, grating cry as one foot struck against the corpse of the assassin.

A harsh, forced laugh came through his lips as he looked down and recognized the cause of his affright. And with the energy of one who is glad of an excuse for postponing a disagreeable duty, he set to work dragging the carcass away.

"It wouldn't do to leave it there!" he muttered, with a side glance toward the rude couch where Perry Wright lay silent, motionless. "If he should see it—if he ever sees aught again in this world!"

He dragged the corpse to one side, then bent over it with a curious interest. Though frightfully mangled by the fall, he having struck the rocky bed of the canyon first, with the added weight of the young giant to make the work still more deadly, there was enough semblance to humanity remaining for one who had ever known the assassin to recognize his features without much difficulty.

Though his garb was that of a white man, coarse and tattered, all the rest proclaimed the red-skin. And Oklahoma Nick frowned as he recognized the face over which he bent.

"Grasshopper Boy, the Cherokee!" he muttered, rising erect and gazing down upon the face of the dead man, his arms folded tightly over his bosom.

He seemed startled by the discovery, and anything but at ease, for more than once he cast a swift glance about him, like one who half-anticipates a shot from ambush or a treacherous thrust from the rear.

Then, shaking off the spell which had fallen upon him, Oklahoma Nick dragged the mangled corpse still further away, covering it over with the vines and limbs he had cut away before reaching the spot where Perry Wright lay unconscious.

Just tasting the contents of his flask, he returned to the couch on which the young giant lay, kneeling at his side and forcing himself to make an examination. This, of course, had to be anything but thorough. He was ignorant of surgery, and though he had had some little experience with broken bones and ordinary wounds in the course of a rather wild life, he felt at a loss how to proceed in this emergency.

He noticed a blotch of blood on the bosom of the gray woolen shirt worn by his comrade, and gently opening this, he found the track of a bullet, cutting deeply, almost directly over the heart.

"That swift turn saved him!" he muttered, as he traced the course of the bullet and found that it had emerged at the side, under the arm of the youth. "It was going straight for his heart, but that turn fooled the lead!"

He was still examining this wound, when a faint moan came from the lungs of the young giant, and his great eyes partly opened. Oklahoma Nick uttered a low exclamation, and drew back; but only for an instant. He saw those eyes following him, and he hurriedly uttered:

"Thank Heaven you're alive, dear fellow! Take a swig—"

"Mother—Telie—fetch—" faintly murmured the wounded man, his eyes closing and a slight shiver running over his frame.

Oklahoma Nick started, with a sudden lighting up of his darkly handsome face. It was like one who most unexpectedly sees a favorable way opened through what had, until then, seemed no thoroughfare. And from that moment on, he acted and spoke like another being entirely.

"I'll bring them, pard, unless you can go to them instead," he said as he uncorked his flask and held it to the pale lips of the injured man. "Try to swallow just a sup, Perry, old fellow! It'll do you good, and put some life in those poor bones of yours. Try it, and—"

There was no reply, no motion toward obeying. And when Oklahoma Nick gently passed an arm around the neck and shoulders of the injured man, lifting him up a trifle while holding the flask to his lips with his other hand, the liquor trickled down over his chin without any attempt to swallow.

Yet he was living, as an examination proved. His heart was beating regularly, though feebly.

His breath came and went, though so softly that it required a close examination to make sure of the fact.

"He don't breathe like a man hurt inside," muttered Oklahoma Nick, as he gently bathed the youth's face with the pungent liquid. "It's the shock, I reckon! And yet—how could a man take such a tumble and live to tell of it?"

This seemed so incredible that he resumed his examination. He found that one arm was either broken or dislocated; he could not be positive which. He fancied that some of the ribs had been fractured, but here, too, he was left in doubt. In his ignorance he dared not make too persistent an effort to learn the whole truth, lest he hastened the death which reason told him must surely follow such a frightful fall.

"And he must live until he can tell 'Telie!"

Selfish? Well, it may be so; but when one is so deeply in love, one is apt to look out for number one!

A few minutes later Perry roused up for a brief space, again begging in broken, disconnected sentences for Oklahoma Nick to bring his mother and sister to his side. Curiously enough, he never once mentioned the name of his father, though the ties of affection were strong and tender between them in health.

"I wish I could take you to them, instead, old fellow," said Oklahoma Nick, his voice sounding full of pained regret. "They'll suffer death a thousand times over with suspense before I can bring them all this way! And I'd rather be shot to inch pieces than have to carry them this bitter black news!"

"No fault—fetch here—make all—right," faintly muttered the injured man, sinking back into insensibility once more.

And as though feeling a little more resigned after this assurance, Oklahoma Nick made what scanty arrangements for the comfort and safety of his comrade that lay in his power. He formed a little shelter of bushes over Perry's head. He left his canteen uncorked close by his side, propped up with stones so that it could not easily be overturned, and when he succeeded in this, he spoke hurriedly:

"I hate to go away and leave you here alone, pard—hate it like poison! But what else can I do? You can't be moved, and though I'd gladly tote you every foot of the way on my back, I couldn't get you out of this infernal hole before dark! See!" and he called his attention to the food and water. "Try to help yourself, and bear up until I can come back again."

"Bring 'Telie—mother—"

His head fell back, and his consciousness fled once more.

CHAPTER XIII.

JERRY VIGGLES AND HIS NOBLE HOST.

It all passed so rapidly; the insult and its avenging; the dastard shot from behind that sent the boomer headlong to the ground at the feet of his wife and daughter; the wild cry of Otelia Wright as she interfered to save her parent from further harm, sending the chief of scouts reeling back with a shot from the revolver which she drew from her pocket.

It all passed so rapidly that before the scouts could fairly realize trouble was brewing, their chief was dropping to his knees with a stream of red blood flowing through the fingers that tightly clasped his left shoulder. And for a brief space they were on the point of a panic, half-believing that some cunning ambush had been sprung upon them. For a single breath another shot would have been sufficient to send them fleeing at top speed; but that shot did not come.

Poor Otelia, though she so bravely avenged the fall of her father, no sooner saw the chief of scouts staggering back than she dropped her pistol, turning and sinking on her knees beside the prostrate form, sobbing and moaning as though her heart was breaking. And opposite knelt the wife and mother, pale as a ghost, but silent in her grief.

"Satan grill the wildcat!" snarled the chief of scouts, still clasping the wound from which he was losing so much blood. "Down 'em, lads! Cut him to strips ef ye like, but hold the gal—hold her fer me to pay off as she deserves! Down 'em, you—"

The sound of his voice, with the absence of further shots, checked the incipient panic, and with a united rush the ruffians swept the two women, screaming, pleading, thinking only of their father and husband, away from the motionless body of the boomer. Their desperate struggles were worse than useless in such strong, brutal hands.

"Rope the crazy wildcats!" snarled the wounded villain, leaning against one of the wagons for support, his bronzed face that of a demon, with savage hatred in every line. "Rope an' hopple 'em! Pitch 'em into the tent an' some o' you come look to my arm—I'm bleedin' wuss then a stuck hog!"

A rattling volley of curses bore these sentences company, but they are omitted for decency sake.

One of the ruffians—short, slender, wiry, but making up in malignancy what he lacked in physical power—crouched over the prostrate boomer, one hand buried in his iron-gray locks, jerking back his unresisting head, the other

sweeping a glittering knife in circles as a mongrel sort of war-whoop burst from his skinny lips.

Horrible as it sounds, the fellow—of cross-breed beyond a doubt—actually intended to scal the defenseless boomer. But before he could put this intention into play, a strong hand caught his arm and hurled him endlong away.

"None o' your Injun work, Tommy Ducklegst Orders is orders, an' they've got to be kerried out even ef I hev to play boss my own self!"

The wounded ruffian gave a howling curse as he saw this, and he started forward from his support, fumbling at his belt with his blood-wet hand.

"Who told you to chip, Jimson Joe?" he snarled, showing his yellow, wolfish teeth viciously. "I said to hash him up, an'—"

"An' the boss said we wasn't to do no more harm then we hed to, didn't he?" was the cool retort of the tall, athletic fellow who had interfered to save the scalp of the boomer.

He made no effort to draw a weapon, though he was keenly watching the unsteady hand of the chief, ready to dodge a shot or close at once, whichever course promised the greatest chance for safety.

"I'm loss, now, an' what I say goes as it lays!" with another long string of curses. "You chip in an'— Ketch me—I'm gone up!"

He staggered heavily, and would have fallen in a heap but for the prompt action of Jimson Joe, who sprung forward and gave him the required support. It proved to be only a temporary faintness, caused by the free escape of blood, added to his hot passion. And in a few moments more Tom O'Donnell was pretty well himself again.

"I don't want no row with either you or Tommy Ducklegs, Jack," the tall ruffian said, his voice cold and even, but showing that he meant every word that passed his lips. "But you know what the boss said: we was to do the work the easiest, cleanest way we could. We wasn't to do more hurt then we hed to, an'—"

"I'm goin' to git even, boss or no boss!" doggedly growled the wounded man. "I've got my discharge fer—"

"You ain't hurt bad enough to kill a 'skeeter, pard," and there was a trace of contempt in the voice of the speaker. "Jest a bit o' lead through the thick o' your arm; an' what does that mount to?"

"It's easy enough for you to talk, durn ye. But—"

Talkin' ain't my best holt, pard, an' you'd ought to know as much by this time. Orders is orders, an' I'm goin' to stick by them as long as I can pick trigger or play knife—an' them's words with the bark all on!"

Jimson Joe stepped back until his rear was protected by one of the high-bedded wagons, his hands gripping his revolver butts, though as yet he made no effort to draw them from his belt. His face was white and hard-set, his little, bead-like eyes were glittering like the orbs of an enraged serpent. An icy smile parted his thin lips just enough to show a line of white below his thin mustache.

A cool, dangerous rascal he looked, just then. And all save the man with a bullet through his arm seemed to realize as much, too.

"Down him, lads!" snarled the angry ruffian, himself starting up to a sitting posture as though he would lead in the attack; but a choking groan rose in his throat as he fell back, blindly.

"I don't reckon I'd try it on, pards," coolly uttered the rascal at bay, his icy smile growing deeper, his teeth showing more plainly. "It ain't only me you'll hev to buck ag'inst, but the boss. Jack Howgood ain't in his sober senses, jest now, or he'd be the fu'st one to say I was dead-right in what I'm doing. An' then—wouldn't it be jest as well to find out whether the critter we're squabblin' over is anythin' letter then so much cold meat? Durned ef I thought o' that afore!"

There was a trace of comedy mixed with the tragedy, after all. And the threatened collision was averted for good.

Jimson Joe was far too shrewd a rascal not to join in the laugh which his quaint dismay produced, and he abandoned his defensive position to be the first man at the side of the still motionless boomer. To look at him then, no one would have realized that, a few seconds before, he had been standing at bay with a most promising prospect for losing his life in defense of his principles.

"A clean sell from the jump-off!" he cried, with an admirable assumption of chagrin. "Takes Jack Howgood to fool a pard when he gits right down in the traces—bet your ole rubber boots it jes' does!"

His nimble fingers had sought out the wound, laying bare a bloody furrow along the skull, just over one ear. The lead had torn its way through the scalp, but without fracturing the skull. The shock was heavy enough to produce instant insensibility, causing the boomer to drop in his tracks as falls the steer under the ax of the butcher.

"Take his tools, lads, an' then truss him up fer safe keepin' ontel the boss comes," added Jimson Joe, rising to his feet with increased hu-

military. "Es fer me—I'm goin' to eat dirt tell my craw's full!"

He strode over to where Jack Howgood—no longer to be dignified by the title or name of an honest man—was reclining, and meekly "chawed dirt," to use his own term.

"I was a blessed fool, pard, to fly outes I did. I might 'a' knowed *you* wasn't one to go flat back on the orders of our boss. I *did* know it; but I didn't hev time to think straight. I ax pardon, as one man of another. Let it rest right thar—eh?"

Jack Howgood hesitated, scowling blackly. He knew that Jimson Joe was playing the hypocrite for a purpose. He knew that a chance was being offered him to back gracefully down from a position which he was quite shrewd enough to doubt his ability to hold. But his wound was smarting sharply. His worst passions were fully aroused. And he felt that he would willingly risk his own life for sake of drinking deep of revenge.

Jimson Joe saw how he was hesitating, and rightly interpreted it.

"Ain't I chawed dirt enough, pard? Must I git down on the two knees o' me to ax forgiveness? I *kin* do it—I *kin* do it, *ef* I *must*; but I wouldn't try to rub it in quite *that* deep, ef I was in your place."

Softly, smoothly came the words, but there was a vicious sting concealed just below the surface. Jack Howgood felt this, and it rushed him on further than he might have ventured in cold blood.

"I'm boss enough fer this job, Jimson Joe, an' hyar's to prove it!" he snarled, jerking forth a revolver and discharging it on the instant.

If he had been content to act before speaking, possibly he might have gained his desperate end. But he had to deal with a man who was quick as chain-lightning, and full of expedients.

Jimson Joe spread out like a jumping-jack, one foot striking the pistol and hurling it far away as it exploded, the other driving the head of Jack Howgood back with resistless force. And without a glance at his vicious comrade, the outlaw wheeled with revolver in each hand, ready for instant use should any of the party think of taking up the quarrel of their temporary chief.

"Stiddy by jerks, boys!" he cried, his voice sharp and ringing as his glittering eyes flashed over the startled faces before him. "Don't make a mistake in valuin' your keards, fer I don't hold no slouch of a hand my own self—an' the boss is backin' of it up, too!"

There was a brief period of hesitation—a pause that none could predict the ending of. There was a swift interchange of glances, as though each man was waiting for another to make the first move.

"Jack Howgood tried to drop me with a snapshot while I was eatin' dirt to make him feel the let-down more easy," added Jimson Joe, quick to improve a chance. "Of course I got out of trouble the best I knowed how. I rammed his cabeza with my toe, an' put him to sleep. When he wakes up, I'm willin' to give him all the git-even he wants. But neither him nor the pile o' you kin bu'st orders while Jimson Joe's able fer to stan' up fer the boss—an' him comin' any minnit!"

"He ain't comin'—he's got here, my bully boys!" cried a sharp, disagreeable voice as a single horseman came dashing around the clump of timber, drawing rein and leaping to the ground with one motion. "Now what's all this racket about, anyway? Who 're you tryin' to swaller, Jimson Joe?"

Not much like the waif of the storm, taking his garb into consideration, but Jerry Viggles, for all that. Jerry Viggles in a clean and entire suit of clothes, armed to the teeth, brisk in voice and prompt in action. And from the manner in which Tommy Ducklegs, the half-breed, and his fellows shrunk back, Jerry Viggles possessed authority and the nerve to see that it was respected.

Jimson Joe laughed softly, feeling proud of his position, but he was too shrewd to make the most of his advantage. To do so would gain him increased favor with the "boss," but it would at the same time earn the undying hatred of his comrades; and the wild life they led afforded too many chances for sending a bullet or a knife-thrust home.

"Jest foolin', boss," he promptly replied, putting up his weapons and assuming an embarrassed air that served his purpose without entirely blinding his master to the real facts of the case. "Jest tryin' fer to pass away the time ontel you got here. You didn't think we was playin' wolf-eat-wolf in dead airnest, I hope?"

Jerry Viggles was far from being a fool, after his own style. He could take a hint as well as a better man, and something in the thin, keen face of Jimson Joe warned him not to inquire too closely into the matter. So, with a dubious grunt as he looked toward Jack Howgood, now recovering from that stunning kick back of his ear, he bent over the form of the boomer, whose senses were just returning.

"You see, boss," confidentially uttered Jimson Joe, yet in tones loud enough for his fellows to catch, thus making sure he was saying nothing to prejudice them. "They was a little row, afore

we knowed it. Dan tried to buss the gal, an' the ole man downed him fer keeps. Jack didn't know but what the critter was startin' out to run a-muck, an' so he creased him. That made the gal red-hot, an' she salivated Jacky. An' takin' it all in a heap, it made a right nasty little circus fer a bit—an' then you come up, jest in time to see the endin' of it all."

Jerry Viggles turned to Jack Howgood, who looked none the better for the bloody bunch that was starting out on his neck.

"Lucky fer you that it wasn't more'n a crease you give him, Jack! Lucky fer you that you didn't plant your lead deeper!"

"It wasn't my fault that they ain't a hole clean through the head o' the pizen critter," sullenly muttered the wounded rascal. "He killed Dan Switzer—wuth a rijiment o' sech trash as him! I shot to kill, an' I ain't denyin' of it. Make the wust of it—*you*!"

It was a dangerous game to play, but it proved a successful one, despite the heavy odds. Jerry Viggles was not quite ready to dispense with the services of this blunt rascal, and he only showed his teeth in a vicious grin as he made reply:

"You didn't riddle him, an' that settles it fer now. You kin talk it over with the chief, when he turns up. You an' him fer it, Jacky!"

Turning away, Jerry Viggles paused beside Evander Wright, who had managed to lift himself to a sitting posture, despite the bonds that held his limbs helpless. There was a dazed look in his face, and his bloodshot eyes roved about with a bewildered expression that told of badly scattered senses. He stared at Jerry Viggles as he paused before him, but it was not until the ruffian spoke that he seemed to recognize him. Then, his face flushed hotly and he cried in fierce anger:

"You dirty whelp! you run off my hosses!"

"Deed I jest did, honey," laughed the ruffian, squatting on his heels before the pinioned boomer, a malicious pleasure in his foxy face. "Not that I'm a boss-thief. Not that I coveted my neighbor's property. But just to make you realize what it is to bu'st the law wide open! Jest to punish you fer bein' wicked enough to 'vade the land which b'longs to the pore, helpness red-skin. Jest fer that, honey!"

Evander Wright was brought back to a full consciousness of his situation by these words. His confused brain cleared away, and he cast a trembling, shuddering glance around in quest of his dear ones, fearing the worst for them.

"They're in the tent, ef you mean the ladies, honey," grinned Jerry Viggles, showing his yellow teeth. "The boys jest hopped an' staked 'em out to keep 'em from eatin' up the intire comp'ny. Mighty despr't characters they've turned out to be, soft an' silky as they look to the naked eye! Wouldn't 'a' b'lieved it was in 'em, ef the proof didn't lay right afore the two eyes o' me—no I wouldn't!" and he glanced with an affected shiver of horror at the corpse which still lay as it had fallen, in a pool of coagulating blood.

"Tuck 'em fer perfect angels, no longer ago then the last night that ever was! Turrible shockin' how things kin 'ceive a common critter, ain't it? Now I reckon you tuck me fer a pore devil dropped down in camp by that howlin' twister. Reckon you tuck me fer a mis'able cuss that wasn't dangerous to nothin' more'n bread an' sech chuck!"

"They's tricks in all trades but ours, ye see, pard," with that disagreeable, mocking laugh. "An' sech fun! It shakes the fat off o' the ribs o' me in great gobs jest to think how lively I bobbed around playin' sarvent to your master an' mist'ess! To think how many times you emptied your cups, jest to make me bubble over with pure delight to think that I could pay you back in part by waitin' onto ye! An' all the time I was squirtin' sleepin' powder into the cups! *Good Lawd!*"

The mocking rascal fairly doubled up with mirth as he recalled his treacherous deeds. It was well for him that his noble host had not slighted their work, for Evander Wright flung every ounce of strength into an effort to burst his bonds, to free at least his hands.

If he had, not all those grinning ruffians who looked and listened could have saved him in time from those vengeful hands.

"An' then the 'way-up Oklahoma Nicholas! The look o' his mug when I put the grip onto him as he snored on his post! It was wuth a life-sentence jest to see that! The mighty hunk-muck-a-muck to be tuck into camp by a mis'able no-count critter like Jerry Viggles! But I've got to sober off, or bu'st my britchin' all to flinders!"

The malicious rascal pulled on a long, hang-dog face as he added:

"It wasn't fer fun nur glory, nur yit profit, that I run off your stock, my Christian friend. It wasn't fer nuthin' o' the sort that I left sech a plain trail fer Oklahoma Nick an' your over-grown cub to foller. Not a bit of it! I jest wanted to read you all a lesson fer bein' sech wicked critters—fer breakin' the laws o' this glorious Gov'ment! An' I've done the fu'st half o' what I set out to 'complish—bet your ole socks I jest *hev* now!"

Evander Wright hung his head, with a hollow

groan. He thought of his son—gallant, true-heart! What evil fate had befallen him? What devilish snare had he fallen into? For that some evil had befallen both Perry and Oklahoma Nick, he felt assured. If not, Jerry Viggles would hardly be wasting his time so carelessly!

"It's the truth that hurts, my Christian friend," mocked the merciless ruffian, chuckling maliciously as he read aright the meaning of this wretched moan. "I hate to say it, but sonny ain't jest fit fer rough travelin' no more. He tumbled down an' hurt himself *bad*! An' ef Oklahoma Nick ain't heap luckier then most men, he'll make a turrible slip-up afore he kin tote the sad news clean back this fur!"

"You've killed them, you merciless hell-bound!"

"That's a lie, an' I never looked to hear sech a sin come out o' them Christian lips—no, I never did!" whined Jerry Viggles, rising to his feet and turning away, after one long, mournful gaze into the white, haggard face of his helpless captive.

From the little tent came low, choking sobs that told of anguish most intense. Evidently the poor women had overheard the words of the outlaw, and believed them true.

A sign from Jerry Viggles collected his noble host together, and a few hasty words told them what their chief had decided upon doing. His word appeared to be law, and they fell to work without delay.

Several men climbed into each wagon and began tumbling out the contents, using more haste than care. Others under the eye of Jerry Viggles, who seemed too proud to lend a hand where actual work was to be done, sorted over the goods, piling such goods as their boss indicated in the newest wagon. Still others overhauled the harness and unsaddled four of their animals, preparing them for the road as draught-horses.

The corpse of Dan Switzer was crowded in the rear of the loaded wagon, and Jack Howgood, his wounded arm dressed rudely but effectively, was assisted into the driver's seat, though he was hardly in condition to hold the reins.

This done, Jerry Viggles made a sign, and his fellows dragged the bound and helpless boomer to one of the hind wheels of the other wagon, some holding him upright with his face to the white tilt, while the rest bound him with ropes to the wheel.

Jerry Viggles himself entered the little tent, quickly returning with the struggling form of Mrs. Wright in his arms, leaving Otelia behind, pitifully pleading for the lives of her parents.

The poor woman was secured to the opposite wheel after much the same fashion, and Jerry Viggles cut away a portion of the white tilt on each side, so that husband and wife could see each other's faces.

"That's goin' a little funder then the law 'sists on, mind ye," the foxy rascal grinned. "It's a kindness on my part that ye don't 'pear to 'preciate as ye'd orter, jedgin' from the way you're snashin' the teeth o' ye, my Christian friend. But never mention it. Ef I don't git my reward in this world, mebbe I will in the next."

"You devil!" hoarsely muttered the boomer, his temples almost bursting with the swelling veins. "I don't ax anythin' fer myself; but spare *her*—don't leave a *woman* to starve like this!"

"With you, husband—with you to the end!" murmured Mrs. Wright, striving to steady her voice, but breaking down in a wail of motherly grief and fear. "Telie—my poor child! God save her!"

"What's the matter with me?" impudently grinned Jerry Viggles, as he leered at the tortured parents. "What's the matter with me fer a guardeen angel? Bless the two eyes o' ye, ma'am, they shain't a mite o' harm come to the lady-bird while Jerry Viggles is to the fore. Let one o' the boys dar' to squint cross-eyed at the pritty-by-day, an' I'll drap down onto him like a house-a-tumblin'!"

"Es fer you, what ye kickin' up sech an unholy bobbery fer, anyway? Hev we hurt ye a bit? Hev we bit the nose off o' ye, or crippled ye up the least mite? Not as I kin see—not as I remember, we hain't!"

"Jest set ye up as a couple o' signs fer yer friends to admire, when they happen to chance this way. An' how much is that? Would ye rather be rigged out as stiffs? Would ye rather hev the wagon set afire, or yender keg o' powder strung by a string to the fire over yen' way? Ef so—spit it out! Anythin' to keep peace in the fambly is my motter!"

Evander Wright flashed a look into his face, that, reckless, evil as he was, caused Jerry Viggles to shrink back, one hand dropping to his waist as though he felt an almost irresistible impulse to draw a pistol and send a bullet crashing through the prisoner's skull.

"Don't you look cross-eyed at me too hard, critter!" he muttered, with an evil glitter in his eyes. "Keep your threats in your own head, or mebbe you'll find they's still wuss treatment then being trussed up this fashion. I don't *want* to rub ye out, fer—Bah!"

He turned away on his heel, with a shrug of the shoulders, like one out of patience with himself.

"Jack," he said, addressing Howgood, beside whom a man was now seated, reins in hand. "You'll take charge o' the wagon. You know whar to take it. Git thar, as quick as you know how, an' be ready to do the rest o' the work ef I ain't on time. You understand?"

Jack Howgood nodded assent, and then the wagon rolled out of camp.

Neither Wright nor his wife gave this a passing glance, for they were far too terribly interested in what they feared was yet to follow for thought of their stolen goods. They saw Jerry Viggles moving over to the tent where they knew Otelia was lying bound and helpless, and they dreaded the worst. Yet they could do nothing to guard or preserve their child. They could only move their heads. They were bound too tightly to even struggle against those bonds.

Jerry Viggles entered the tent, picking up Otelia in his arms and carrying her across to the wagon, despite her desperate struggles to escape from his loathsome grasp.

"Say good-by, my Christian friends," he laughed, maliciously holding his captive so that she could kiss her parents, one after the other.

This Otelia did, but when the ruffian moved back a pace or two, a low, gasping wail broke from her lips and her head drooped.

"Dead—murdered—my darling child!" gasped Mrs. Wright.

The father said nothing, but there was an awful vengeance in his bloodshot eyes that cowed Jerry Viggles and made him regret having yielded to this last devilish torture.

He passed the unconscious maiden over to the one man who remained with him, springing into the saddle and bending over to again take charge of the maiden. As he relieved the other rascal of his burden, he also mounted, ready for the road. Jerry Viggles only paused to cry:

"Here's hopin' somebody 'll chance 'long this way in the course of a week or two, my Christian friends! Ef not—waal, we'll meet on the other shore, mebber! So-long!"

With a laugh that was not near so full of careless recklessness as he tried to let on, the foxy rascal gathered up his reins and rode around the clump of timber, vanishing from the agonized gaze of the terribly tortured parents.

How long that ride lasted, or how great a distance they had covered during her unconsciousness, Otelia Wright never knew. She seemed to be shocked back to consciousness by the horses coming to a sudden stop. And like one in a waking dream, she heard the grating oaths that announced some disagreeable discovery on the part of her captors.

"Out guns, pard!" grated Jerry Viggles, angrily. "We've got to down the durned critter fer keeps or he'll salivate us!"

And as her eyes opened widely, Otelia caught a glimpse of a single horseman swiftly charging—of Oklahoma Nick!

CHAPTER XIV.

OKLAHOMA NICK WINS ONLY TO LOSE.

OUT from a small clump of timber past which the two rascals were riding dashed a single horseman, uttering a sharp challenge as he came:

"Halt, you devils! Set that lady free, or I'll blow you through!"

For an instant Jerry Viggles seemed all taken aback, but then he swung around, lifting Otelia so that she afforded a tolerable screen to his own body, sharply crying:

"Halt you critter! Keep your ways, or it'll be the wuss fer the gal! Back, you hot-head! Cain't you see how we've got you foul?"

As he spoke, his right hand flashed over the head of the helpless maiden, claspings an ugly-looking knife, the point of which threatened her heart. And at the same time he grated in tones too low for Oklahoma Nick to catch:

"Try a snap-shot, Jimson Joe, ef he don't—I thought so!" and a shrill, mocking laugh broke from his lips as the guide abruptly wrenched up his horse.

"You cowardly cur!" savagely cried Oklahoma Nick, his voice hardly recognizable, so intense seemed his rage. "Dare to harm a single hair of her head, and ten thousand lives wouldn't be enough to carry you through! Put her down and meet me two to one, unless—"

"Kin you drap him or his critter, pard? It won't do to miss, or—"

Otelia Wright heard these muttered words. Saw the gaunt outlaw preparing to make the attempt, partly covered by his comrade. And she cried aloud to warn the guide:

"Look out, Mr. Van Bibber! They're going to shoot!"

She was too late to hinder the shot, but her unexpected warning must have unsteadied the aim of the tall outlaw, for Oklahoma Nick gave no signs of having been hit. Instead, with a vengeful yell, he urged his good horse forward, holding his fire until it could be made certain.

A sudden plunge of the animal ridden by Jerry Viggles with his captive, almost unseated them both, and in regaining his balance, the rascal lost his knife. Cursing viciously, he steadied himself, calling out to his follower:

"Down him, Joe! It's him or us now! Down him fer keeps!"

The unsteady plunging of the frightened horse caused a division of the partners in crime, and though Jimson Joe sent bullet after bullet whizzing over the plain, Oklahoma Nick still dashed on as though resolved to decide the matter by a hand-to-hand struggle. Straight on until less than a hundred yards divided them; then his rifle rose with marvelous quickness, sending out a spout of flame-tinged smoke.

And with a choking cry, Jimson Joe dropped his weapon, clutching at his left breast as he swayed for an instant in the saddle, then dropped to the ground, lying still and motionless as his horse broke away.

Until then Jerry Viggles had made no attempt to use his firearms, for his hands were full with his captive and his frightened animal. He seemed confident that Jimson Joe could dispose of the daring guide unaided. But now, as he saw his fellow fall like one shot through the heart, he dropped Otelia to the ground and caught his rifle from its slings beneath his thigh. He swung himself far over on one side of his animal, letting it run at will, showing no mean skill in the action.

Oklahoma Nick swerved in swift pursuit, his rifle speaking rapidly row that there was no longer any danger of hitting the woman whom he loved so madly. And before Jerry Viggles could fire a second shot, he tumbled to the ground, rolling over and over in a quivering heap!

And without giving him a second thought, Oklahoma Nick, victor in that exciting duel, wheeled his horse and rode rapidly back to where the maiden was struggling to a sitting posture.

"You are safe—you are not hurt, 'Telie?" he gasped, flinging himself to the ground and catching her in his arms. "That rascal didn't dare to touch you with his knife? Oh, my love—my darling!"

He strained the maiden to his breast and covered her face with kisses hot and passionately; only to give a great start as he heard:

"Perry—what have you done to my brother, Nick Van Bibber?"

It was like a sudden *douche* of ice-water, and it produced pretty much the same result, so far as his transports were concerned. His arms parted, and as if he had just now noted the fact, he cried:

"Bound? Those infernal—"

"Where is my brother?" sharper and clearer than before.

"Perry? Safe and sound, 'Telie," he hastily muttered, as he drew his knife and rapidly cut her bonds. "Tell me how—"

"Where is he?" persisted the girl, for the moment losing sight of all else in her sisterly love. "Why does he not come? Why are you all alone—Nick Van Bibber!" catching him by an arm and gazing keenly, searchingly into his face. "You are lying to me! Perry is dead! And—you killed him!"

Her very madness stood Oklahoma Nick in good stead, just then. If her charge had been less positive—if she had not jumped to such a wild conclusion—his changing countenance must have betrayed him. As it was he could reply with a show of truth:

"You wrong me most bitterly, Miss Wright. I have not killed your brother. When I saw him last he was alive and—"

"Where did you leave him? Why? Oh, why do you force me to tear the truth from you word by word? Speak—where is Perry?"

The poor girl was almost distracted. She hardly knew what she was saying or doing, just then. All she knew was that her dark forebodings of evil seemed coming true.

Oklahoma Nick saw that the poor girl was nearly wild, and he felt that she could not bear up under a fresh blow, such as he must deal if he were to tell her the truth. Better a lie than have her break down completely, just when she needed her strength of body and mind the most.

"I was trying to tell you, 'Telie, when you cut me short," he said, his grave voice and subdued manner cutting the poor girl far more deeply than he thought or intended. "Perry has gone on to camp with two of the horses. I was tracking up the others when I happened to sight those rascals with you, and—"

"Father—mother—take me to them, at once!" gasped Otelia, her troubled thoughts flashing back to the wretched plight in which the raiders had left her parents. "They will die! Take me back to them—take me back!"

Oklahoma Nick glanced quickly from her pale, haggard face to the motionless body of Jimson Joe lying hard by, and his jetty brows contracted sharply. He seemed to divine her meaning, incoherently though it was expressed.

"You have had trouble at camp. There—do not try to tell me now. Wait until you have composed yourself a little. I can guess close enough to the truth, knowing that Jerry Viggles had you captive."

Otelia was not listening. In her distraction she feared to lose an instant, now that her mind had reverted to her parents. She felt that she must hasten at once to relieve them from their cruel bonds, from their mental torture on her

behalf. And with that madness upon her, the poor girl turned away and staggered unsteadily over the plain, choking down her sobs, one hand tight clasped over her throbbing heart.

"'Telie, you are going the wrong way!" cried Oklahoma Nick, springing after her, now fully realizing how terribly the poor girl's nerves were unstrung. "Trust to me, 'Telie, and I'll take you to them," he added, lifting her shivering form in his strong arms, and whistling to Cherokee.

The well-trained animal came trotting up, and Oklahoma Nick gently seated Otelia in his saddle, holding her on as he walked toward the little timber island from which he had dashed out at the kidnappers.

"Faster! faster!" murmured the poor child. "We'll save time in the end by this, 'Telie," was his soothing response. "I'll rope one of those horses, and then we'll soon gallop to the camp. Trust me, little one. I'm well-nigh as anxious to get there as you can be!"

When the grove was gained, Oklahoma Nick lifted Otelia from the saddle, holding her in his embrace for a moment before permitting her feet to touch the ground. Even then he kept one arm about her, gazing steadily into her eyes, holding them as by a spell. Slowly, distinctly he spoke, giving his words time to penetrate the cloud that seemed to envelop her poor mind.

"'Telie, promise me that you will wait right here until I come back. I'll not be gone long; only to rope one of those horses for you to ride back to camp. If you should stay away, it would still further delay the rescue of your parents. You can understand what I say?"

"Yes—I hear you," murmured the poor child, brokenly. "Go—but for the love of Heaven do not waste any time! Poor father—poor mother!"

"By this time Perry is with them, and all is well," slowly added the guide, only thinking how he could best bring her back to a normal state of mind. "They are suffering only on your account, and the quicker you recover your strength the sooner we will be able to relieve their anxiety. Try and keep this in mind, little one. For unless you grow stronger, I can't take you such a long and weary ride."

Perhaps it was his manner of speaking, or possibly because of this closing sentence, conveying the idea of still further delay, but Otelia really seemed to rally, and when she spoke it was more like her usual self:

"I will not stir. Make all possible haste. If you could only know what tortures they must be suffering!"

"Perry is with them, and you will not be so much behind, 'Telie," he said, springing into the saddle and preparing his trail-rope as he rode rapidly out upon the prairie.

The horse ridden by Jimson Joe was the nearest. That from whose back Jerry Viggles had fallen was far away, suspiciously watching the movements of the guide, and Oklahoma Nick gave him but a single glance as he rode toward the other animal.

With the trail-rope formed into a lasso, it was the work of but a few minutes for the skilled cowboy to capture the creature, whose resistance ceased the instant the noose closed about its throat. And without giving the prostrate kidnappers so much as a passing look, Oklahoma Nick led his captive back to the grove where Otelia was waiting his return.

It did not take much time to fit the man's saddle for her purpose, and Oklahoma Nick lifted her in place, slipping her foot into the shortened stirrup. He sprung upon his own horse, and then they rode away over the plain through the falling twilight.

Otelia looked anxiously at the gathering clouds, but Oklahoma Nick smiled reassuringly as he read her fears aright.

"Never mind them, 'Telie. Even if it does cloud up a bit, never fear but I'll lead you straight as a string to camp. It's about all I'm fit for, but I'm at home here in the prairie."

"It is so far!" murmured the poor girl, striving hard to choke back her rising fears. "They must have been riding for hours and hours, though I knew nothing until I heard your shot—until I roused up to see you charging out of the trees!"

"Where I'd been watching the rascals for some little time," responded Oklahoma Nick, speaking far more lightly than he felt, for he saw that his charge was far from recovered as yet. "I saw them miles away, and something seemed to tell me there was mischief in the air. So I kept under cover, though it was terrible hard when I first recognized you lying in that scoundrel's arms! Only that I feared for you, 'Telie, I could not have held my passion in check so long!"

"I have not yet thanked you—I will, some day. Just now—"

It was neither wise nor generous, but Oklahoma Nick was insanely in love, and that must be his excuse.

"I ask only one word, 'Telie!" he uttered, pressing close to her side and catching one hand in his ardent grasp, his dark eyes almost blazing through the gloom as they sought hers. "Say that you do not hate me! Say that you will try to return my love—that you will be my wife, darling!"

Otelia shrunk from him as well as she was able under the circumstances, but it was in vain that she strove to free her hand. Now that he had taken the first plunge, Oklahoma Nick could not retreat.

"Why are you so cold—so unfair to me, darling? Have I deserved to be scorned as you scorn my love? Am I so hideous—so evil? Surely I am not all bad, else your parents would not favor me as you must know they do favor me! Does their judgment go for naught with you?"

"You are cruel—you are wicked to press me now, when I am half-distracted with fears for my folks!" panted Otelia, wresting her hand from his close grasp. "If you are a gentleman, say no more until I am more at liberty to answer you plainly!"

A short, hard laugh broke from the lips of her escort as he kept close to her side despite her increased pace.

"Surely you are talking plain enough when you offer such a plea, 'Telie! But I will not accept it. I will not believe there is no hope for me. My love for you is so intense that it must surely win its reward. I'll make you love me, darling!"

"You'll make me hate you, rather! Oh, Nick, why do you press me so cruelly? Am I not suffering enough without you making it still worse? Think of poor father and mother! Each minute is an age of suffering to them while I am absent! And without you to guide me, I could never find my way through this darkness—through the coming storm!"

"I'm taking you to them, straight as a string, 'Telie."

"But I'll have to make my way alone if you refuse to drop this miserable subject. Do not drive me to that, Nick; I ask it for the sake of those who love you only less than they love their own children."

There was a brief silence, during which the couple rode steadily on through the darkness; for now the threatening clouds had shut out the last glimmering of twilight. All about them was darkness, and it seemed impossible for one to make a straight course over that roadless plain. But Oklahoma Nick seemed wholly at ease so far as going astray was concerned. With one hand on the rein of the horse ridden by the maiden, he pressed on as though following a regular turnpike.

"I can't give it up, 'Telie," he said, after a considerable pause. "This suspense is killing me by inches, and even the worst would be better than keeping on as I have for months past!"

"Then why not take the answer I have already given you, Mr. Van Bibber?" was the slow response, in a clearer, steadier tone than Otelia had been able to command before. "Surely I have spoken plain enough for you to understand my meaning?"

"I'll not take it that way, 'Telie," with a dogged sound in his voice that sent a little shiver through her frame. "Sometimes I more than half believe that this love for you is driving me mad! Sometimes I fear it is turning my brain upside-down! I've tried to smother my passion for you, but the more I try the fiercer it blazes up until—girl!" with almost savage intensity as he leaned across until she could feel his hot breath on her cheek. "What if I should go mad—what if your scorn should turn me to a devil in human shape? What if I was to give way to the mad impulse that bids me take you in my arms and either win a pledge from you that you will be my wife, or crush you to death against my madly beating heart!"

With a cry of fear, the poor girl struck her horse with hand and foot, trying to dash away in the night—forgetting all else in her growing terror of this man who spoke so strangely. But Oklahoma Nick kept his grip on the reins, and quickly subdued the struggling horse.

Still, this desperate effort to flee from him, served to bring back the reason that had well-nigh deserted him for the minute, and there was an almost piteous echo in his voice as he spoke again:

"Forgive me, Miss Wright. I was mad, but I am sane enough now. I promise not to speak of my—on that subject again until you are safe with your family. For their suffering's sake, I beg you to forgive, even if you cannot forget."

"It was cruel," murmured Otelia, faintly, her trembling tones showing how severely she had suffered during those few minutes. "I will try to forget—only take me to father and mother and brother."

Oklahoma Nick said no more as they rode steadily on through the darkness. He almost cursed himself for having given way so completely to his insane passion. He had stood little chance of winning before, but now he stood still less. It would be many a long day before Otelia could forgive or forget the fright he had given her.

The darkness grew more intense, and low, distant rumblings told of a coming storm. There were no flashes of lightning visible, despite the thundering, but none who were out in that black night could doubt the steady approach of a storm. Not of the wild, destructive nature which had wrought so much pain and suffering and grief on the evening before, but a heavy rain-fall at the best.

And then the first drops began to patter on the plain, growing more rapid with each minute, until the rain came down in sheets. Oklahoma Nick paused long enough to strip off his heavy hunting-shirt and wrap it closely about Otelia's shoulders, despite her faint remonstrance; then they rode on at the same steady pace.

To Otelia it seemed impossible for a human being to find his way through such a storm and in perfect darkness; but great as was her anxiety on this point, she dared not question her companion after what had passed between them. She feared to speak, lest that mad, reckless passion should again burst its frail barriers. Even suspense was far preferable to that!

And on his part Oklahoma Nick was content to maintain silence. He had ample food for thought.

After that first blinding shower the storm moderated, though the rain fell liberally still. But it came gently, steadily, free from wind, and was not very chilling. Had their minds been at ease on other points, neither of the night-travelers would have felt actually uncomfortable, though saturated to the skin long ago.

Steadily on through the night, Oklahoma Nick guiding both animals without showing the least sign of growing bewildered by the intense gloom which surrounded them. It was as though he was kept from straying by some subtle instinct which was more animal than human.

And as the time wore on, Otelia gradually grew more composed. She fully believed what Oklahoma Nick had told her about the return of her twin-brother to camp, and she felt that, hours ago, Perry had set her parents free from bondage. Only for her absence, they would be comparatively happy. For what was the loss of their property in comparison with what remained? They were alive, unharmed, together: for already she felt that they must be close to the timber island from whence Jerry Viggles had carried her, a senseless burden before him.

It seemed as though Oklahoma Nick possessed the power of reading her thoughts, for even as this reflection passed through her brain, he spoke out calmly:

"We are almost home, Miss Wright, though you can see nothing of a fire as yet. That is on the other side of the timber."

"And you brought me safely here—I owe it all to you, Mr. Van Bibber!" murmured the maiden, hardly knowing how soft, how remorseful her tones were.

"It is simply the duty I owe you, as one of the party I undertook to guide safely to a new home, Miss Wright," quietly, coldly added the guide. "I deserve no thanks; least of all from you!"

There was a slight unsteadiness in his tones as he added the last few words, that sent a thrill of compassion through the maiden. What a pity he had not always used that tone and manner toward her! For she was a woman, and therefore to be won, if approached in the right manner.

Otelia said no more, for that faint unsteadiness in his voice was a warning she dared not ignore even then, when her weary journey was so near an end. And then—she was so eagerly straining her eyes for the first glimpse of the firelight—for the first sight of her dear ones from whom she had been so cruelly separated.

"Look!" suddenly exclaimed Oklahoma Nick, as a lurid flash was for an instant visible through the darkness directly before them. "There is the fire as I prophesied! In five minutes more, you will have forgotten all your troubles!"

Otelia tried to lift her voice in a glad shout, but it died away in her throat. She reeled in her saddle, and would have fallen to the ground but for the ready support lent her by Oklahoma Nick. And as he spoke she gasped an assent:

"Call—let them know—"

"Hello, the camp!" cried the guide, his voice floating clearly over the plain. "Saved! I've got her—safe and sound!"

There was a brief silence during which their horses dashed on at speed, and then Otelia heard a reply of some sort: the words she was unable to distinguish, her poor heart was fluttering so wildly.

"They don't understand what I said," laughed the guide, "but I'll soon settle all that! We're coming—'Telie and Oklahoma Nick!"

Loud and distinct he shouted the names, and Otelia heard excited cries from the now near timber. She laughed and sobbed as she pictured the glad meeting. She leaned far forward as though to outspeed her good horse. And then—they dashed around the timber, drawing rein in a circle of firelight. But—a wild, wailing cry broke from her lips as she realized the frightful truth—as she recognized the tall form of Jack Howgood, instead of her father or brother! And her senses fled as she slipped heavily from the saddle.

CHAPTER XV.

THE STORY OF MAURICE NORTH.

THROUGH the rest of that day, there was little talk between Henry Hornkohl and Boomer Balt, and a close observer might have come to the

opinion that neither of the twain was very anxious to enter into close communion.

Neither man appeared wholly at ease under the watchful eyes of the other, though Boomer Balt appeared to find the situation rather comical than otherwise. If not, why his frequent grins and chuckles and knowing wags of his snow-white head? And why should these be the most violent just after his catching Henry Hornkohl gazing keenly though covertly into his rosy face?

Briskly the party rode on until the shades of evening began to descend, and the gathering clouds to warn them of a storm approaching; but thoroughly as the scouts had performed the duty assigned them, as yet they had discovered nothing.

"Ef they was a trail, the twister wiped it clean out," volunteered Boomer Balt as the party went into camp for the night, seeking the partial shelter afforded by the hills, though not entering the broken ground far enough to lose sight entirely of the plain. "Ef the twister didn't, then the rain did!"

"If alive we'll find them; it's only a question of time and patience," philosophically observed Henry Hornkohl.

If the old guide was not in an unusually high good-humor that evening, then he played his part to perfection. He cooked the supper of his employer, as in duty bound, but then slipped away to share that of the four scouts, who also ate separate from the six soldiers. And with his quaint sallies, his jokes and his brisk yarns, Boomer Balt kept the little circle in a roar pretty much all of the time.

But Henry Hornkohl only smiled quietly, like one who can see below the surface as true as the best. He knew that Boomer Balt had not forgotten the words that passed between them while saddling up for the afternoon ride. Knew that the cunning old rascal was playing to stave off the explanation his employer had declared his intention to ask and receive.

He waited and watched until the scouts finished their meal. Though Boomer Balt managed to greatly protract this, he was not able to keep it up through the entire night, and then Henry Hornkohl managed to intercept one of his uneasy glances, lifting a finger and beckoning for him to approach.

A cold smile curled his lips as Boomer Balt hesitated. He beckoned again, and the guide slowly responded.

"Yours truly, boss! Will it be six or seven stories high, or—"

"One story will be quite enough, Balt, if you use a little truth with your cement," smiled the detective, a gleam of white below his brown mustache.

"Brown-stone front an' marble trimmin's? Hurricane deck up atween the smoke-stacks, an' a cornish o' little devils jumpin' over the garden wall? Inside a canopy-top o' pink silk an' white lace, with a patent 'tachment for fannin' out the 'skeeters an' bud-begs? Anythin', boss. Don't be a bit bashful 'bout seein' what ye ax fer! I kin rig you out this way jest as easy as I kin pitch ye a tent when I hain't got none—Lord, yaas!"

"Your tongue is limbered up enough for my purpose, Balt; so suppose you get down to business?" coolly retorted the detective, leaning back against the rock beneath whose overhanging top he had eaten his supper.

"Mebbe I kin manidge a brush shack, though I won't warrant it to hold water—hold it out, I should say," murmured the guide, one hand thoughtfully tugging at his snow-white beard, a far-away, ruminating look in his great eyes.

"Maybe you can manage to sit down here and tell me just what you were trying to get through you to-day, with your hints of Maurice North, and your nods and winks and other ridiculous antics. Squat, old fellow! I mean pure business, now! You wormed the truth out of me, and turn about is fair play. Why do you try to couple me with Maurice North?"

"Jest to be doin' somethin', I reckon," grinned the guide as he surrendered unconditionally, squatting down before the detective. "Jest to be contrary, mebbe. I'm the dumbest critter that way you—"

"You're not near such a fool as you look, Uncle Balt," laughingly cut in the other. "If I was asked to give an opinion, I'd say you were much more knave than idiot!"

"Like enough, pard," with an owlish nod. "I don't know a man that'd ought to be a better judge than you."

Henry Hornkohl laughed softly at this left-handed compliment, but then his face and voice grew grave and earnest as he added:

"A truce to idle fencing, old fellow. I want to have an earnest talk with you, which may turn out all the better for us both. But first tell me all you know about this Maurice North."

"All I know, or all you know?" with a peculiar smile.

"What I know wouldn't make a very big book, Balt," with a careless yawn behind one hand. "I know that Maurice North was accused of murdering somebody up there in Nebraska. I know that he got off some way without being hanged for the crime. I know, too, that both Oklahoma Nick and the daughter of

Evander Wright were mixed up in the affair; but that is as far as my knowledge extends."

"All right, boss," with a grave nod, though there was a shrewd, half-mocking twinkle in his keen eyes as he spoke. "They ain't nothin' like startin' out with a knowledge of the trail that's afore ye. I've knowed a feller to tell a black joke on a stranger to him, an' then git licked out o' his boots by the very critter he was tellin' of it to. An' all fer not makin' sure the stranger to him was a stranger to the joke, too!"

"You can rest at ease, Uncle Balt; I'm not likely to prove the subject of your yarn, though I freely admit that I'm not a little interested in him—a touch of the shop, maybe!"

Boomer Balt tried to smother another knowing grin by coughing lustily, though without much success. And Henry Hornkohl must have been remarkably obtuse if he failed to see that his last statement was only accepted with a generous modicum of salt.

Still he showed no uneasiness as he leaned back against the rock, refilling his pipe and lighting it. And Boomer Balt also composed himself like one who meant to do his sworn duty without fear or favor.

"It'd take a mighty sight o' time an' wind fer to explain jest how it was I come to git to the place, an' hear the story, an' simmer it all down so I could throw away the scum an' hold fast only to the plain facts, boss, but ef you will hev it—"

"Just confine yourself to the facts of the case, as you understand them, old fellow," curtly interrupted the detective. "Just tell me the story of Maurice North, and let Uncle—I should say Boomer Balt—lie over for the next trip."

"What's the matter with uncle?" coolly asked the guide, that peculiar twinkle flashing back in his eyes. "I'm old enough fer uncle, an' stranger things then that hes happened right whar I kin slap my hand onto 'em—jest as I mought slap you now, pardner."

"Uncle goes, then! But what were you about to say?"

"That Maurice North was a likely young feller up yen'-way, an' ef the plain truth must be told, nobody 'peared to feel more sart'in o' this fact then 'Telie Wright her own self! Leastways, that's the way things looked to me when I come to sorter 'vestigate the case."

"Jest why I tuck so much trouble, don't mind. I hed my reasons fer doin' of it, an' that's enough."

"They was only one snag in the way, but that was a nasty one! The young feller was chuck-full o' life, an' folks called him wild. Those that thought him the wildest was the very two he wanted to please the hardest—after 'Telie, in course."

"Vander Wright didn't take to him fer a cent, an' his lead was his wife 'Melie's foller-after. An' so it come that though Maurice North won the gal's love, he couldn't git no furd' 'long that trail!"

"The old folks wouldn't listen to him nur her, nur yit to Perry, who stuck up stoutly fer all that pleased his twin sister. It was good enough to him ef she tuck a fancy anywhar. As folks said, her will was jest pure law to Perry."

"Maurice North tried all he knowed how to git over the dislike the old folks felt fer him, but it couldn't be done. They turned him out o' doors when he come to beg fer the hand o' thar daughter, an' folks do say that 'Vander Wright even talked o' kickin' an' sech-like doin's, ef the lad didn't skin out in a holy hurry!"

"Stick to the trail, Uncle Balt!" sharply muttered Henry Hornkohl, frowning. "Tell the plain story, without adding any flounces, please."

"Cross my heart ef I didn't hear 'em say jest them words, boss!" earnestly protested the veteran. "I'll take 'em all back, ef they don't tickle ye in the right place, but—"

"Why should I care?" frowned the detective. "Go on with your yarn, and embroider it after your own taste for all I care."

"I ain't sayin' why ye should keer, nur yit that you do keer; but when a hoss that I'm ridin' takes to flinchin' an' runnin' sideways, I never could help lookin' down to make sure that my spur wasn't bumpin' too close to its ribs fer comfort. But that ain't my story, as you say."

"It was a hard time fer the young folks, from all a'counts. They say that Maurice North tried his level best fer to git 'Telie to run off with him an' git married whether or no, but that she couldn't quite fetch herself to go that fur while they was even the ghost of a chance left o' bringin' the old folks 'round to thar way o' thinkin'. An' when he found she held out so stiddy, like many another poor critter afore him, Maurice North swore that she didn't love him half as well as he loved her, an' struck off in a red-hot fever o' mis'ableness."

"They say he went off on a he-ole spree, tryin' to fill himself up to the nozzle with fire-water an' so drown out his misery by leavin' no room fer it to slosh around in. An' from all a'counts, he come mighty nigh doin' of it, too!"

"He fell in with a little gang o' young fellers in town, an' from drinkin' they fell to playin' keards fer pritty much all they was wu'th. In the gang was Nick Van Bibber, an' another fel-

ler named George Humphrey; a country-sort of a gambler an' blood, ye understand."

"Maurice North was pritty well fixed, they say; his folks was dead, an' left him a couple o' good farms, some money an' heaps o' stock. His word was looked on as mighty nigh as good as the ginerall run o' bonds, and that's part reason why when his ready money run out he was 'lowed to go on bettin' as high as he keered, givin' his notes when he lost, which 'pears to be the heft o' the time, from all a'counts."

"It was 'way 'long in the night when the party broke up in a row. It was hard to say jest who was most to blame, but on one pint all who told the story after'ds agreed: Maurice North 'cused George Humphrey o' cheatin', an' knocked him heels-over-appletight with his fist."

"Airly the next mornin' Squire Jones was routed out o' bed by a turrible hammerin' onto his front door, an' when he stuck his head out o' winder, he see a couple o' men who told him to git into his wardrobe es quick es natur'd 'low him; that thar'd bin a bloody murder done not more'n a mile from his very identical door!"

"The squire hustled 'round mighty lively, fer he wasn't no perticklar slouch him own self, ef he did hev to tote the val'ie o' three men's weight 'bout wharever he went. He got his hired men out, an' then the two strangers told thar story."

"'Pears like they was on the tramp, lookin' fer work, an' hed camped out in the hollow 'longside the main road. They was woke up in the night by a ugly sound o' quarrelin' not fur away from whar they was camped, an' though they didn't git up at once, they lay an' listened."

"They could make out two voices, but they said they didn't know either of 'em; which was nat'ral enough, seein' they claimed to be strangers in them parts. They ketched a name or two, but they couldn't jest make 'em out plain enough to 'member after the row was over."

"Then they heard a cussin' an' a racket, endin' in a turrible yell that sent thar heads under thar blankets fer fear an' tremblin'."

"They heard a hoss gallopin' off in a heap hurry, then all was still fer a bit. They tried to make each other b'lieve that they wasn't no harm done, after all, but it was mighty up-hill work. And after layin' an' listenin' fer more'n a hour, they 'solved to crawl down that way to set themselves easy or know the wu'st."

"It turned out to be the last, fer fu'st they knowed they run right in on a dead man layin' by the side o' the road. They only stopped long enough fer to make sure he was dead, then they putt out fer the highest house, skeered to wait fer anybody to come 'long, for fear they would be 'cused o' doin' the job thar own selves."

"Waal, they ain't no use in drawin' the story out, I don't reckon. It was George Humphrey layin' thar dead, cut in a dozen places. They was a knife left stuck in his side, the point reachin' his heart. That was the only clew they was left, but it was enough. Fer more then one o' the crowd that gethered about swore the knife b'longed to Maurice North."

"That was enough to set the crowd to thinkin', an' the squire hurried to the North farmhouse, whar they found Maurice in bed, snorin' off his drunk. They didn't wake him up ontel they tuck a look at his room, an' his clothes. Thar was blood on his coat an' his shirt. Thar was bloody water whar he'd washed his han's an' they was blood on his wrists when they looked, as though he'd bin too nigh drunk to make a clean job o' the washin'. They went through his clothes, but found only a little money. In the stove, they found some torn paper, which turned out to be notes signed by Maurice North."

"Waal, of course he was 'rested an' brung up fer a preliminary trial, like. The two tramps told thar story. The squire told what was noted down at the house. An' Nick Van Bibber come forward to make oath that Maurice North kerried that same knife on the night o' the murder: that one time he stuck it in the table afore him, swarin' that ef he ketched a bit o' cheatin' goin' on 'round the board, he'd drive it to the han'le in the heart o' the one with two nimble fingers."

"This was the heft o' what was brung up ag'in'st the lad, though Nick Van Bibber also swore to one or two o' the torn-up notes. They hed bin won by him that night, an' after'ds lost to George Humphrey, who was the only one that left off ahead o' the game."

"The tramps couldn't take oath that they recognized the voice o' the pris'ner as one o' them they'd heard when in camp. But it didn't need that. Thar was plenty o' cause fer holdin' Maurice North, an' he was bound over to appear fer trial."

"Of all that part o' the country, I don't reckon they was more'n two people, outside o' the one or ones who killed George Humphrey, who held faith in Maurice North. Them two was 'Telie Wright an' her twin brother, Pericles."

"It looks mighty black against the young fellow!" frowned Henry Hornkohl, with a furtive glance into the face of his guide. "I should say he was wise to make a moonlight flitting of it! For he did get away, before trial, I think I heard say?"

Uncle Balt laughed softly as he gazed at the

speaker through his nearly closed lids, slowly nodding assent:

"Yaas, he got away, jest as you think you heard somebody say. He was safe enough in jail when the sun went down, but when the sun come up, whar was he? That's what the jailer wanted to know, right bad; but they wasn't even an echo to answer him whar!"

"And he was never recaptured, of course?"

"Not a ketch!" with that peculiar smile deepening and widening.

"Nor heard of?"

"Nor heard of—leastways by them as hed any object in tellin' what they knowed. I wouldn't like to take oath that I hain't see'd him, as nigh to hand as I be to you this blessed minnit!"

"And you never tried to arrest him?"

"What fer?" with a sudden frown. "I don't b'lieve he killed the gambler. It was either done by them tramps, or—Oklahoma Nick!"

"What makes you suspect him?" sharply demanded the detective.

"Partly one thing an' partly another," was the slow response. "I found out that Nick was tryin' to court 'Telie Wright. That's one reason. The money tuck from George Humphrey was never found, though the hull North place was s'arched over fit to find a lost needle. That's another. Fer ef North was too drunk to destroy his notes; too drunk to wash his hands clean or to brush up his clothes or to kerry off the knife which everybody 'most knowed was his; wouldn't he be too drunk to hide that wealth whar nobody could find it? I say yes!"

"Not a bad point, but one that might apply to any other person as well as to Oklahoma Nick. Mind you, uncle, I don't like the fellow one bit more than you appear to, but I can't help looking at the matter with professional eyes; and I fail to see aught that even shadows Oklahoma Nick as the murderer of George Humphrey."

Boomer Balt simply gave vent to a grunt, that might be interpreted to mean almost anything, or to mean absolutely nothing, for that matter. He shrugged his shoulders a little to the first heavy drops of rain, but made no move to seek more perfect shelter. He seemed waiting for his employer to question him further, or, in default of this, to signify that his duty was completed for the time being.

Henry Hornkohl, better shielded from the heavy drops by the overhanging rock, snoked on in silence, the ruddy light of the camp fire lending a peculiar whiteness to his clear-cut features. He seemed wholly absorbed in thought, and Boomer Balt took the opportunity to closely scan his features, as though trying to forever put at rest the doubts or suspicions which he almost certainly entertained.

But before he could reach a satisfactory conclusion, there came a startling interruption.

A wild, unearthly laugh broke the silence, and as the scouts and soldiers started in surprise, a tall form stalked through the gloom into the firelight, staring wildly about him for a moment. Then, with a hoarse, choking cry, he clasped one hand to his temples, swaying from side to side like a drunken man, then fell to the ground in a quivering heap, his head almost in the fire.

With a sharp cry Boomer Balt leaped forward and dragged him part way around, bending low and eagerly scanning his bloodstained face.

"Help, here!" he cried, his voice hoarse and shaken with strong emotion. "Help—it's Perry Wright!"

CHAPTER XVI.

MOLLY FEATHERTOP AND HER TWINS.

THAT name scarcely crossed the lips of the boomer guide before Henry Hornkohl was at his side, gazing intently into the blood-marked face of the being who had so strangely interrupted them.

"What's up, lad—what's gone wrong?" cried Boomer Balt, as he supported the bare head with its tangled locks of yellow hair, now damp with the heavily-falling rain.

There was strongest anxiety in his voice, and even in that moment of surprise the detective turned to look at the old man, more than ever puzzled; for surely a mere acquaintance would not show such deep feeling.

Only a glance, but it lasted long enough for Boomer Balt to feel and see it, and the detective frowned a little as he noted the instant change which followed. More than ever he felt that there was some strong tie connecting the boomer guide with this yellow-haired giant.

"Gone to sleep too hard fer talk'n', ain't he?" Boomer Balt said, gently lowering the head of the senseless man to the ground, his brown hands rapidly, intelligently investigating, pausing as they reached the bullet-wound in the young giant's left breast.

His ruddy face turned a shade paler as he made this discovery, and there was a hard, vengeful, yet anxious echo in his tones as he muttered:

"Shot! Ef he could only tell who done it an' why! Ef he could only tell what's 'come o' the rest o' the family! Ef—he's got to! You critters, lend a han' to tote this man-mountain out

o' the rain a bit, cain't ye? Standin' thar gawp-in' like—stiddy, man!" almost angrily, as Henry Hornkohl stooped to assist him. "It's a man o' flesh an' blood you're handlin', not a stuffed 'tomaton! Stiddy—stiddy!"

By this time the soldiers had recovered from their amazement, and were ready to lend a hand. As for the scouts, they had already vanished in the darkness, instinctively guarding against any further surprise.

The wounded man was carried back to the shelving rock where the force of the rain was broken, and placed on a couple of blankets. Boomer Balt gave Henry Hornkohl a hastily improvised torch to hold, and by its light made a more thorough examination, giving a long breath of relief as he traced the course taken by the bullet.

"It's an ugly hurt," uttered the detective. "The poor fellow must be as strong as he is big to go wandering about on a night like this with such a hole clean through him!"

"Ugly to look at, but heap prettier to think of then what I fu'st tuck it to be. Give ye my word I thought they was a shaft sunk right slam-bang through the lad's blood-pumper!"

"You know him, it appears?" ventured the detective.

"I know that he's in a monstrous bad way," evasively replied the boomer guide, shaking his head as he pursued his investigations. "One arm broken clean off! Ribs bu'sted wide open! An' more sore places scattered around then would kiver a acre o' ground ef they was spread out flat! How it come gits me! Looks like he mought 'a' bin run through a thrasher, or some-thin' o' that sort!"

The scouts came in and reported their inability to find any one else prowling about, while the darkness and the heavily falling rain put it out of their power to solve the mystery by tracking the young giant back to where he had come from.

Dick McBride, the scout in command, volunteered to set the broken arm, which offer was gladly accepted by Boomer Balt. The guide lent his aid, and as the young giant still lay in a strange sort of stupor, there was no particular difficulty in making a fair job of the operation.

By this time all of the party knew that this injured man was one of the party for whom they were searching, and naturally their curiosity ran high as they speculated on the outcome: What had happened? How came he so badly injured? Who had shot him? Where the rest of the family? Close at hand, or miles away?

"That's what I'd give a heap to know for dead sure!" gravely uttered Boomer Balt, wiping his brow, though the evening was cold and in his present position the guide was sheltered in a degree from the rain, so the unusual moisture could hardly have been attributed to the last. "That's what we've got to find out jest as quick as the good Lord 'll let us."

He fell to work with whisky-flask in hand, and ere many more minutes passed by he was rewarded by seeing the great eyes of the young giant open heavily; by hearing a faint sigh come from his bruised breast. But there was no reason in the dull, vacant stare with which Perry Wright answered his hurried questions. And though there gradually came a change as Boomer Balt repeated the names of his sister and parents, it was anything but satisfactory.

A wilder light came into the blue eyes, and a hectic flush to his bruised face. A convulsive shudder ran through his frame, and broken, hardly articulate words fell from his lips. Breathlessly Boomer Balt listened, trying to catch the all-important clew.

He could distinguish several names—those of "Telie, and his parents, that of Oklahoma Nick; and his eyes glittered vividly as he saw that this last name was never uttered save with shivering and evident dislike—almost fear and hatred.

There was something about a neglected warning which he could not understand, and then, starting half up, Perry Wright cried, huskily:

"Telie—true! Ha! you demon—would you murder? Merciful Father! we're falling—falling—"

With a choking groan the poor fellow's head dropped back, and he lay once more insensible.

Boomer Balt shivered like a leaf as he rose to his feet, and just the ghost of a smile flitted across his pale face as he caught the keen eyes of the detective fixed upon him with that old, puzzled look.

"Never you borry trouble, pard," he muttered, with a poor assumption of his wonted careless lightness. "A critter that wouldn't show feelin' over sech a sight ain't no right to be called a man at all."

"And you know him so well, too?" muttered Hornkohl.

"I know that he's goin' to be a mighty sick nian afore he gits to be any weller. I know that he's bin played dirt the wu'st sort by some p'izen critter; an' I'm bettin' my ducats that I kin shout out that critter's name fu'st off."

"You mean Oklahoma Nick?"

"I do, fer a solid fact!" was the positive response. "I know jest as well as though I'd looked on at the hull game, that Nick Van Bib-

ber hes bin gittin' in his dirty work. I know that ef this pore lad cain't hev better shelter an' 'tention then he kin git here, he'll never live to tell jest how Nick Van Bibber come the turn over him."

"What can we do?"

"Git right down to solid work—an' this is the programme: We ain't more'n a mile from a snug little hole in the ground whar a sick man mought easily 'magine himself in a palace so fur's gnuine comfort is consarned, an—"

"Yet you never mentioned as much, though you saw the storm coming and knew that we had no sort of shelter," half-angrily muttered Henry Hornkohl, with a half-shiver as he moved nearer the fire.

"I hed my reasons, which don't matter to anybody jest now," a little sharply retorted the guide, frowning at the interruption. "Mebbe I wanted to keep my own secrets which nobody was payin' me fer. Mebbe I clean fergot all about it. Mebbe I was too lazy an' sore to want to travel so fur out o' our way. Mebbe it don't make no difference, anyway."

"Pards," turning to the interested soldiers and the four scouts, "you're white. You don't ax extra pay fer doin' a good job, but you've got to take it. I don't look like a stray Nash'nal bank, but I've got solid rocks enough to pay big fer the sarvice I ax of ye now, as man to man! Help me rig up a litter strong enough to tote this pore young feller to a palace whar he'll stand some show fer his life. It'll be hard work, but I'm ready to pay big wages, an—"

"Say what you want done, old man, and cheese the money part," interrupted Dick McBride, with a half-frown.

"Durn the wages—but you kin make a present fer to git drunk on when we take a turn off duty," grinned another of the scouts.

"Ef I don't you kin shoot me!"

Busily, deftly, they fell to work, making a litter out of blankets and poles, and half an hour later the injured youth was being carried through the night.

The rain was still falling, but greatly moderated in its force. The breeze which had accompanied its advent, had died away, and Henry Hornkohl had little difficulty in keeping his torch alight as he led the way, directed when and where to turn by Boomer Balt, who was sturdily bearing one end of the litter.

He had spoken no more than the simple truth when he said they would find it hard work, for the route was rough and difficult enough for men who had no weight to carry, and more than once the bearers were obliged to pause for breath, though as only four men could support the litter at a time, there was a ready relay at brief intervals. But the old guide so manfully played his part, doing more than any two men in the party, that not a complaint was uttered.

They left the plain behind them, pushing into the hills, following for the most part a narrow, winding valley that might almost be called a canyon, its width was so little, its sides so precipitous. Then up a steep, winding trail where progress was made only with the greatest difficulty; where the rain rendered their footing still more precarious; so narrow that the red glare of the torch was of silent utility to the men who brought up the rear. And at length, with a long sigh of relief Boomer Balt pronounced the journey at an end.

The torch-light showed them an opening in the rock wall, sufficiently high and wide for them to enter without shifting positions at the litter. And a few paces further on, this widened and raised until a really spacious cavern opened before their curious gaze.

The litter was gently lowered to the ground, the bearers dropping to the sanded floor, panting heavily. Boomer Balt hustled about, and in a very few minutes the ruddy glow of a fire began to fill the cave.

"Hope we're not intruding, old fellow!" grunted Henry Hornkohl as he glanced curiously around him, noting the rude but comfortable evidence of former occupation.

There were a few skins hanging on the rock wall, with several army blankets. There was a pile of dry leaves and fine grass, showing traces of having been used more than once as a bed. There was a pile of dry wood, and a smoke-stained fireplace where the draught led up through a chimney-like aperture.

"I'll pay the rent, never you fret, pard," laughed the boomer guide as he hustled about, piling skins and blankets on the rude couch, then assisting in placing poor Perry Wright upon them.

This done, and after a look to see that the jolting journey had not loosened the bandages too much, Boomer Balt turned to his mates, speaking earnestly, rapidly:

"You know who we're lookin' fer, pards. You know that this lad is one o' that fambly. You see how bad hurt he is, though I'm hopin' he'll pull through all right with the sort o' help I kin fetch him. You see this—but who kin say what's come to the rest o' that fambly?"

"The most o' you hev heard o' the man that is best knowed as Oklahoma Nick, from his rangin' fer years in these parts. So fur they ain't nothin' very black painted ag'inst him on the open record, but I tell you a wuss critter

then that same Nick never drawed the treath o' life! An' when you know that he's actin' as guide to this fambly, you kin give a guess that he don't mean 'em none too much good."

"What I want to git at is this: Tom O'Donnell sent you with us to find an' turn back these folks. That's your duty, an' I know you'll do it the best you know how, keepin' inside the line o' duty. But I ax ye to do more'n this—heap more!"

"It ain't the nicest night fer to be out, but ef you knowed they was wimmen in trouble, you wouldn't stop to think o' the weather nur yit o' the time o' day. You would feel like kickin' me fer offerin' you pay fer sech work, but when I put it as a favor, I know you'll let me say what sech a sarvice is wu'th. I ain't wrong, pards?"

"Give us the rest, and we'll let you know," dryly uttered McBride.

"I want you to go out an' hunt fer the camp o' this pore lad's fambly. I want you to do it jest as ef you was each one workin' to save his own wimmen folks. I don't want the dark nur ther rain nur anythin' else to hold ye back from doin' your level best. An' whether ye hit or whether ye miss, I'll bind myself to pay you twice over what you think is right fer the extry work. Thar it is; what say ye?"

"You think there is evil work then?"

Boomer Balt turned and pointed to the unconscious giant.

"Don't that look like it? How come he so? Who shot him? Who kivered him all over with cuts an' bruises, like he'd bin chucked over a stone wall or down a kenyon? Oklahoma Nick! I b'lieve that as truly as I b'lieve they is a just God in the heavens over us this night!"

His manner, even more than his words, won over the men, and after a brief consultation together, the scouts and the soldiers announced their readiness to do what they could without further delay. Dark as the night was, they might be able to discover the family by the light of their camp-fire.

Strangely agitated, Boomer Balt shook hands with each man in succession, bidding them god-speed as they turned to leave the cavern and return to where their animals had been left when they set out with the litter. Then Boomer Balt turned toward Henry Hornkohl, who alone remained in the cave with him.

"And my part?" asked the detective, slowly.

"To stop here an' look after the lad. You ain't afeard to do it?"

The detective shrugged his shoulders by way of reply. Boomer Balt understood his meaning, and hurriedly added:

"I'm goin' to fetch a nuss fer the boy, an' I won't be gone longer then I kin help. He wants better keer then either you or me kin give him, ef he's to pull through this sickness—an' pull through he must! He's too likely a lad to go under at the say-so of Nick Van Bibber!"

"What proof have you that Van Bibber did this evil work?"

"I feel it in the bones o' me," was the quieter response. "That sounds like a fool was talkin', but it's the niggest I kin come to the way I feel jest now. But to come back; I don't reckon you'll hev any trouble with the pore lad. Even ef he does wake up flighty, he'll be too weak to make much of a fight."

"Don't borrow trouble on my account, Uncle Balt," was the quiet response. "I've handled crazy men before this, and it takes a sound man to get away with me when I've got my eyes open. And I don't feel much like sleeping—that's a fact!"

"Then I'll go, to git back all the sooner. Ef the lad wakes up an' kin talk at all, try to git at the bottom facts, pard."

"You can trust me, Uncle Balt. Pull out, now!"

With a last lingering look at the young giant who seemed so dear to his heart, the guide turned and left the cavern. Henry Hornkohl went as far as the entrance, bending his head in listening until he heard Boomer Balt pass safely down the perilous path. Then he turned and went back to the side of the unconscious youth.

It was a long, but not a weary vigil that Henry Hornkohl kept that night. He had plenty of food for thought, and now that there existed no reason for keeping a guard over his expressive features, the red glow of the fire fell upon a countenance that registered many a change as his brain worked busily and persistently.

Part of his thoughts turned upon Boomer Balt, and he strove to decide whether or no he was more than he seemed outwardly. He recalled their conversations, and went over the half-admissions dropped by the old man, nearly all of which pointed to a startling fraud—to a pretended dead man!

"I could almost believe him Onesiphorus Wright!" came muttering from the lips of the watcher.

He started at the sound of his own voice, and forced a laugh as he realized whither his musings had led him. It was preposterous! Old Wright was dead and in his grave, long since!

Then he turned to thinking of the family for whom he was searching, and wondering what fate had overtaken them—for he, too, seemed to

"feel it in his bones" that evil had befallen them, as it most certainly had come upon young Pericles Wright.

Then the injured man began to mutter, moving restlessly in his sleep, and the detective eagerly, breathlessly listened to catch the important clew. He caught enough to know that the poor fellow must have met with a truly frightful experience. And a dark frown corrugated his brow as he heard the name of Oklahoma Nick, coupled with terms that left no doubt in his mind that the guide had treacherously sought to kill Perry Wright.

It was but a vague remembrance of the parting warning given by his twin sister before taking the trail of the horse-thieves, but Henry Hornkohl had no means of knowing this.

He questioned the sufferer, but without success. And then Perry Wright once more sunk into that death-like stupor.

Thus he was lying when the sound of footsteps without aroused the watcher, and Boomer Balt came into the cavern, most strangely laden—with a pair of dark-eyed children in his arms!

"Don't you git skeered, pard," chuckled the guide after a hasty but searching glance at the unconscious patient. "They won't hurt ye a mite ef ye don't try to 'pose onto 'em by tryin' fer to look at thar teeth by way o' findin' out how old they be! Harmless as kittens, an'—'scuse me!" with a sudden nod of his head as he hastily dropped the children to the floor, snatching off his hat with one hand and extending the other to a woman who followed close at his heels. "Come pesky nigh fergettin' all the manners I ever knowed!"

Bowing at every backward step, gracefully swinging his hat in perfect time, smiling and simpering like a frosty lover, Boomer Balt led the woman closer to the fire, then stepped aside, bowing first to her and then to the detective as he added:

"Pard, this leddy is Mistress Molly Feather-top; Molly, my pard, Mister Henry Coldhorn, Esquire. Know each other!"

Molly Feather-top bowed slightly to the startled detective, but then her eyes passed him by to rest on the prostrate figure. And with a silent step she moved forward, sinking to her knees beside the young giant, gazing intently into his face.

She was young, and despite her half-savage garb, by the firelight she looked almost beautiful, decided the interested detective. If her face were not so grave—if it were a thought fuller—

"Pard," came the low tones of the boomer guide, with just a tinge of reproach in them. "Pard, is this the pure article?"

Henry Hornkohl turned with a start, to see Boomer Balt standing with one of the children on either side, that painfully polite expression seemingly frozen upon his rosy countenance.

"What is it, Uncle Balt?"

"Pard, the interduction ain't over with yit! Pard, look at these two twins—this 'ne a boy, an' t'other a gal. Twins, mind ye—Molly Feather-top's twins fer short!"

Henry Hornkohl stared, for a moment believing his guide under the influence of liquor. Instead, Boomer Balt was simply carrying out what he felt a solemn duty.

"Pard, this is George Washington Feather-top. Know him! This is Marthy Custis Washington Feather-top. Know her! Twins, yender gent is my pard, Henry Holecorn, Esquire. Know him, both twins o' ye! An' now set down an' make mud-pies out o' this nice clean, dry sand—so!"

With a hand on each jetty head he pushed them to a sitting posture in the middle of the floor, then furtively brushed his damp brow with his sleeve as he drew a long breath of relief.

"Be durned ef I'd 'a' tackled it at all, ef I'd thought it was sech monstrous hard work, pard," he muttered confidentially as he dropped alongside. "But when the ole man sets a-goin', it takes a obstickle big as a mount'in fer to stop him afore he gits thar, ef I do say it my own self! How's the lad b'in sence I went away?"

Hornkohl briefly replied, as there was not much to report. Boomer Balt frowned blackly as he heard what Perry had muttered about Oklahoma Nick, but made no comment.

"Who is that woman?" asked Hornkohl in a guarded whisper.

"Molly Feather-top—a Cherokee Injun squaw," promptly replied the guide, in the same tone of voice. "Knowed her fer more time then I kin count up jest now, without stoppin' to think. Mighty fine gal, eh?"

"And the twins—"

"Look at 'em, pard!" with a low chuckle as he glanced admiringly toward the solemn tots, still sitting as his heavy hands had left them. "Ain't they jest too sweet fer any use, as I hearn a woman say once? Who you reckon they favor in the face, eh?"

"You, of course" bluntly replied the detective, solemn as an owl.

"Good Lawd above us all!" spluttered Uncle Balt, turning fiery red as he started to his feet, his eyes protruding more owl-like than ever. "You don't mean to say that—wal, now I am dummed!"

"Knew them at the first glance, Uncle Balt.

The very picture of you in feature and expression. Would have recognized the stock had I run across them in New York City. You all over, Uncle Balt—shake!"

CHAPTER XVII.

OUT OF BONDAGE.

THROUGH the coming of evening, through the settling gloom of night, through all those long hours of storm and darkness, Evander Wright suffered—suffered tortures far too intense for words to express.

Bound so tightly that he had no power to move a limb; only permitted a slight motion of his head; absolutely powerless to relieve the cruel strain that was constantly increasing as his limbs grew numb with the checking of the blood circulation. Physical torture enough to turn black hair white, and a strong brain to imbecility; but all this was as naught compared to his mental tortures.

For hours after Jerry Viggles bore away their daughter, jeering and mocking, gloating over their helpless agony, Permelia Wright gave no word or sign in answer to the appeals of her husband. She stood with head drooping against the wagon-side, motionless, speechless, lost to consciousness; and for hours Evander Wright believed her dead—slain by that dastard blow.

Think what those hours must have been to the man, so strong and full of life, yet so utterly helpless, so impotent!

And even when a faint moan from the lips of his wife signaled her return to consciousness—for now it was far too dark for his eyes to distinguish her face through the hole in the white tilt—that was but a brief gleam of joy.

Alive—to suffer all the more!

Still, they could talk, and that was something.

More than either husband or wife appreciated during those awful hours. If either had been alone; if they had been gagged beyond the possibility of speech; they would almost certainly have gone mad during those hours of agony both in body and mind, when shrouded in darkness.

When Evander Wright burst out in his impotent fury, calling down curses from Heaven on the heads of all who had part or lot in their sufferings, Mrs. Wright would try to soothe him, thus benefiting herself by the very consolation she sought to give him. And feeble though the hopes she raised, it was enough to keep her husband from going mad.

That hope was the speedy return of their gallant son, with Oklahoma Nick, when they would be set at liberty and permitted to make some decided move toward the rescue of poor Otelia.

A hope frail at the best, when they recalled the mocking words of Jerry Viggles; but growing firmer and more slender with each hour that dragged its slow length along.

What was the nature of the trap which had been set for him and Oklahoma Nick? Were they captured, helpless like themselves? Had they been ambushed and—not killed!

And then, as though their sufferings were not yet complete, there came to both the helpless ones the remembrance of what Otelia had said while trying to prevent the departure of her twin brother.

Was all this the work of Oklahoma Nick? Had he betrayed them so cruelly? Was he at the bottom of all their misery?

In vain they tried to banish these maddening thoughts; they would return with redoubled force, until Evander Wright gave way to them, and fell to raving, cursing the guide who had lured them from a peaceful happy home, to doom them to a fate ten thousand times more bitter than death!

It was in vain that Mrs. Wright, forgetting her own misgivings, sought to reason with her husband; in vain that she showed how many sacrifices Nicholas Van Bibber had made for their sakes; in vain that she spoke of his all-absorbing love for Otelia, and how impossible it was that he could ever for an hour place her in such vile hands.

All in vain! Evander Wright felt that the scales had dropped from his eyes at last: felt that never until now had he known Oklahoma Nick as he really was.

Hour after hour. Through the pitilessly falling rain. Through the intense gloom, unrelieved by the faintest ray of light. Through the long night to the slow coming of dawn.

Silent enough then! Supported in an upright posture by the bonds that were in themselves a torture enough to craze an ordinary mind. But with eyes closed and stupefied brains. Looking far more like dead people than living.

The rain ceased, the sun rose with every prospect of a beautiful day, clear and still. And presently its bright rays seemed to warm Evander Wright back to life.

Back to wretchedness such as few men have been called upon to endure for so many hours without relief—back to a consciousness of all that had happened, of all that must yet be endured before the coming of the end!

He recalled the thought afterward—the boomer felt almost thankful that his wife was past further suffering as he saw her head drooping against the wagon-bed, her face white

as that of a corpse, and drawn like that of one who had perished by starvation!

Here recalled how he felt that could he move just sufficient to reach her lips with his—if he could only kiss her once more as he had kissed her in the past—he could then close his eyes and die!

So strong grew this wild fancy—so completely did the idea possess him that one touch of her lips would end his tortures with the death which she had already found—that he fell to fighting with his bonds like one struggling to gain a dearly prized treasure. And as he struggled to reach that poor, white face, he fell to raving and screaming like a maniac.

The sound of his voice aroused Mrs. Wright from her death-like swoon, and temporarily forgetting her own tortures, she sought to calm her husband; a true and loving woman even in that dread emergency.

She succeeded, but it was only for a time. As the sun rose higher in the heavens, these fits of madness seemed stronger and more frequent, until the poor woman felt that if help was much longer delayed, it would be too late for him—too late to save his poor brain, even though his life might be spared.

And yet, from whence was aid to come? Long since she had given over expecting the coming of her son. Long since she had felt the mocking words of Jerry Viggles meant that death had overtaken poor Perry.

Dick McBride drew rein and sprang lightly, steadily upon his saddle, balancing himself with grace as he stared keenly, intently over the plain under the noonday sun. Only for a moment; then he dropped back and slipped his feet into the stirrups as he uttered:

"I reckon we've got 'em, boys! Anyway, there's a wagon over yonder by that clump of timber! If not the ones we're hunting, maybe we can learn something from them."

A touch of the spur sent his jaded but willing steed forward, followed close by the scouts and soldiers. Both men and beasts looked all the worse for their long toil through night and storm, for right nobly had they labored to carry out the wishes of Boomer Balt, and with hardly a pause they had scoured the plain in search of the Wright family. Without even a gleam of hope until now, since there could be no trail to guide them, only a fortunate chance that could lead them aright.

The animals themselves seemed to feel inspired as they loped across the wet plain toward the timber island, for even they could recognize a white-tilted wagon standing out in relief against the dark background. And then—with stern-set faces, with many a muttered curse against the heartless demons who had wrought all this torture, the scouts set Evander Wright and his wife at liberty.

For many a minute even Dick McBride feared that their aid had come too late to save life. Man and wife were both insensible. They seemed beyond recovery as the scout bent over them in examination.

A medical student before his love of roving and adventure led him to break irksome bonds, Dick McBride had more than once found his early training stand him in good stead; but never had he been more thankful than now for that knowledge. He was strongly interested in the case which a curious chance had brought him in contact with, and now he bent his every power to restoring the tortured couple to life.

It was a difficult case, so intense and so prolonged had been the ordeal, but he partially succeeded; he restored them to life, though not yet to reason. Indeed, he seriously doubted whether they would ever fully recover their minds.

While their chief was thus engaged, the rest of the party scattered about in search of sign, or else busied themselves in cooking a much needed meal. The first had nothing to report; the heavy rain had completely obliterated the trail left by Jerry Viggles and his gang.

The report of the second section was much more gratifying, and not even the anxiety which Dick McBride felt for his patients prevented him from making a hearty meal, in which hot coffee formed a prominent and most grateful part.

After this meal was over, McBride took a hasty examination of the effects lying scattered about as left by the raiders. Though of considerable value to one who contemplated settling on a new place, there were but few articles which he replaced in the wagon, the remainder being stacked up under shelter of the trees, with a note pinned to a trunk above them, stating that they were the property of the army. Then a bed of grass, covered over with blankets, was formed in the wagon, and the two patients placed thereon.

From the scattered harness, enough was selected to serve for two horses, which were then attached to the wagon. The two men thus dismounted took the seat, one to drive while the other kept an eye on the invalids. Then Dick McBride led the way by the shortest route back to the hills.

There was but little difficulty experienced in making the trip, until the broken ground was gained. Both of the horses selected were "harness wise," though long unaccustomed to work in

that fashion, and after a little awkwardness at the start, they did their duty well.

Both Wright and his wife bore the trip better than McBride had dared to hope. The little nourishment which he had managed to get down their throats appeared to have done them great good, and they were conscious, sane enough to thank him faintly when the wagon came to a halt at the hills and he looked in upon them.

This was far better than he had dared to hope, and it was with a light heart that he talked to them while his men were preparing letters such as they had used to convey the wounded youth to the cave in the rocks.

He told them that their son was safe, though injured too much to take a prominent part in their rescue. And as he saw the great tears of joy roll down their haggard cheeks, he felt richly repaid for all the toil he had undergone on their account.

He dared not question them too closely, as yet, about the missing girl, or how they came to be left as found. They were far too weak as yet, and nothing could be done in that direction until after they were taken to the cavern.

He begged them to take a little of the whisky and water which he mixed for them, and fairly cheered in his delight when Evander Wright climbed out of the wagon with his aid, and declared that he was already strong enough to ride a horse.

Mrs. Wright was placed in a litter, and with a man riding behind the boomer to steady him in the saddle, the party left the wagon and started into the narrow valley which led to the cavern.

The trip consumed time, for Evander Wright was still very weak, and more than one pause was necessary on his account. But the trip was made without serious delay, and when the foot of the winding trail was gained, Evander Wright made no resistance when four stout men offered to carry him up it.

The litter with Mrs. Wright went first, the boomer following. And when the two suffering ones caught sight of Perry Wright lying on his couch near the fire whose ruddy glow lit up his face, their agitated cries caused his eyes to open—his lips to utter the first lucid speech that had passed them since Oklahoma Nick left him in the canyon.

Henry Hornkohl watched this meeting with interest, and though he kept well in the background, he closely scanned the faces of mother and father, like one who either knew them well, or wished to impress their features upon his memory beyond the possibility of ever mistaking them.

Molly Feathertop quietly moved aside to give them place, though her thin, grave face still wore that indefinable expression which only nurses seem capable of wearing. It was plain enough that she still looked upon Perry Wright as her especial charge.

After his first greeting, Evander Wright gave place to his wife, as men instinctively do under such circumstances: for our sex makes but clumsy nurses at the best, and who so fit as a mother? And that mother seemed to forget her own suffering, her own weakness, in caring for the young giant who was still a baby in her eyes, in her heart.

Dick McBride, seeing how much better Evander Wright had borne the ordeal than he had dared expect, now ventured to question the boomer as to what had occurred at the camp by the timber island. And in broken, uncertain speech, Evander Wright told him all—all save the frightful tortures which he and his wife had endured before their coming.

Then the scouts drew a little to one side, consulting together as to their wisest plan of action, and while the boomer was thus left to himself, Henry Hornkohl approached him, introducing himself and at the same time asking pardon for presuming to enter on business matters when so much anxiety prevailed.

"But when I tell you that I am going to join those men in their search for your daughter, Mr. Wright, you can understand why I am unwilling to leave my sworn duty unperformed. Of course I expect to come through in good shape, but accidents will happen, and I want to leave a clean record behind me."

Evander Wright muttered something in reply: what, he hardly knew himself. He was indeed in a poor condition for business, after all he had undergone, after the loss of poor Otelia and the misfortune which had crippled her brother, just when his aid was needed most.

But Henry Hornkohl was not easily bluffed off, and feeling that he had a duty to perform, he fell to work.

By close questioning he satisfied himself that Evander Wright was indeed the person he had sought for so long, and then he made known his mission.

"You had an uncle, named Onesiphorus Wright, I believe?"

Evander Wright nodded assent, his gaze still fixed on his son.

"I am sorry to inform you that he is dead, and—"

"You lie!" almost savagely cried the boomer, flashing one glance into the face of the startled man, then breaking into a hollow laugh as he pointed toward Perry, who partially lifted his

head at the sound of his father's voice. "See! he's livin'—he'll git well ag'in!"

"I meant that *your* uncle was dead: Onesiphorus Wright," distinctly uttered the detective. "Your uncle, not your son."

"Oh—Uncle Oney—only him?" muttered the boomer, brushing a hand across his damp brow, then adding in a steadier tone: "Ef you don't mind, stranger, we'll put it off a little. I'm—I feel all broke up—I ain't fit fer talkin' nur yit listenin', ye see."

"I only ask a very few words, my dear sir," persisted the detective, with an uneasy glance toward the scouts whose conference seemed about at an end. "I must insist on telling you why I have taken so much trouble to hunt you up. I must give you these, which you can look over at your leisure. Then, if anything should happen to me on this little trip, you'll know just what to do and where to turn first."

"Your uncle Onesiphorus Wright is dead, and has left all his property to you and your family. There are certain conditions, but none to which you can reasonably object when the great amount of the property is taken into consideration."

"Please take the papers, and stow them safely away; unless you will glance over them now, which course I would greatly prefer, as guarding against possible accident. You will find the name of the law firm which has charge of the matter, marked on the papers, so—"

A sudden bustle among the scouts and soldiers cut him short, and he glanced around just in time to catch sight of Boomer Balt as he entered the cavern, the red light of the fire revealing a strongly agitated countenance.

"Got 'em—thank God!" the boomer guide ejaculated as his hurried glance showed him Evander Wright and his wife, the latter sitting beside the wounded youth, his sound hand tenderly clasped in hers.

"Got them, as you see, pard," laughed Dick McBride, his eyes glowing with honest pride and delight. "And we'll have the little circle complete before another sun, too!"

"Bet you we *will*, now!" chuckled the guide, with a strange hoarseness in his voice that Henry Hornkohl felt was purposely assumed.

And a moment later he felt fully confirmed in this suspicion, for when Evander Wright, electrified by something in the voice or manner of Boomer Balt, rose to his feet and staggered forward, the detective saw how adroitly the guide backed around until his rosy face was kept in the shadow.

"You know somethin'—you fetch some word o' my pore 'Telle!" gasped the boomer, his voice so choked as to be hardly audible.

"Deed I jes' *does*, pard!" croaked Boomer Balt, coughing lustily behind one hand, bowing his head with a suddenness that cast the long white locks over his forehead and eyes.

"She is—she is not—not—"

The sorely shaken father could not utter the words, and Dick McBride almost angrily cut in:

"Out with it, man! Don't you see how the poor fellow suffers?"

"She's well, I reckon, though I didn't jes' see her with the own eyes o' me. I knows whar she is, an' I kin putt the hand o' me on her in the dark with my eyes shet! An' ef you lads—'course you will!" with another croaking laugh as he whirled about and caught up the twin children, thrusting them upon the trembling boomer as he added:

"I'll fetch her back to ye, safe an' sound! An' thar's the s'curity fer keepin' my word good! Take 'em, pard! Grip 'em tight, an' ef I don't come back to 'deem 'em inside o' this night, you kin freeze to the twins an' Molly Feathertop throwed in—dummed ef you *cain't*, now!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

OKLAHOMA GROWS DESPERATE.

WHEN Otelia Wright recovered her senses, she found herself confined in a rude brush wicki-up or shanty, in a measure protected from the still falling rain. For a brief space she could not recall what had happened, or where she then was; but the mists gradually passed away from her poor brain, and with a gasping cry she started to her feet—only to be confronted by the brutal face of Jack Howgood.

"Don't you git too skittish, gal!" he growled, showing his teeth by the red light of the campfire that followed him through the lifted blanket that served as a door.

"Father—mother—let me go to them! Think what they are suffering—"

"I'm thinkin' heap more 'bout how I'm sufferin', an' who done it," interposed the outlaw, with a grimace, as he tenderly nursed his bandaged shoulder. "Better you hold your hush, pritty! The boys hain't got over talkin' 'bout Dan Switzer yit, an' ef they should take a notion fer to make you pay fer his kickin' the bucket—waal, I don't reckon they'd be 'nough o' ye to go more'n hafe-way 'round! Best hold your hush, I tell ye. Keep a-fergittin' all ve kin, an' count it a lucky trip that Nick Van Bibber made a mis-cue in the dark an' fetched up here 'stead o' whar he was aimin' fer."

The ruffian said still more, but poor Otelia did not hear, or if she heard, did not heed him. The name of Oklahoma Nick seemed a revelation to her. She believed now that her blackest fears had fallen far short of the real mark. He was a traitor of the deepest dye. It was all his cruel work—all his plotting and scheming!

She felt that he had connived at the theft of their horses, even if his fertile brain had not long before plotted the whole thing. She felt that he had led off Perry to captivity or death, simply to rob her of her dearest, truest protector. That it was by his orders Jerry Viggles had returned to raid the camp, to leave her parents to a lingering doom, to carry her away in order that the cunning schemer might try to win her love by a pretended rescue. She saw it all now—and her poor brain reeled until she sunk back on her rude couch with a choking moan, feeling that all was indeed lost.

There must have followed a spell of wild delirium, for she could afterward dimly recall strange figures moving about and passing to and fro; could recall faces and even snatches of conversation such as one may remember after a desperate fit of illness. And she remembered, too, how she raved at the sight of Oklahoma Nick.

Or—was it all a horrible dream?

There was a foundation of truth. Jack Howgood grew alarmed at the death-like appearance of the poor girl as she sunk back on her grass-couch, and called in assistance. It came none too soon. The poor girl broke out into the wildest ravings, calling piteously on her mother, her father and brother. She fought against her captors as long as her poor strength lasted, now bitterly upbraiding them for their cruelty, then pitifully begging them to let her go and set her parents free before they starved to death.

At length her powers failed her and she lay exhausted, sleeping heavily from the strong drink which had been almost forced down her throat.

The night passed, and it was far along in the day before she awoke, weak but with a clear brain. She lay almost without motion, without thought, gazing dreamily up at the rude rafters above her bed. In a vague way she was wondering what had happened, where she could be, when a low groan startled her and she lifted her head.

To utter a gasping cry of mingled surprise and fear, of wonder and almost loathing, as she recognized Oklahoma Nick lying on the floor in one corner of the rude cabin to which she had been removed while unconscious.

The door swung open and a shaggy head thrust itself inside, then withdrew and a sharp cry followed. A minute later the door again opened and Jerry Viggles entered the cabin, grinning and rubbing his hands as though tickled half to death.

"Lookin' bright an' peert as—durn ye, critter!" with a vicious curse, as he stumbled over the prostrate guide. "Git out o' the way when you see a gentleman comin', cain't ye!" and he rudely kicked Oklahoma Nick in the side with his heavy boot.

"You cur!" gratingly cried the guide, lifting his head, only to be hurled back by another brutal kick. "If my hands were free for a single instant I'd—"

"Git swallered alive an' kickin', without pepper, salt or greasin'!" laughed the outlaw, turning toward Otelia, who was now sitting up with her face full of bewilderment.

"He there—bound!" she muttered, almost unconsciously.

"He wouldn't be thar ef I hed my say," growled the ruffian, with a malignant scowl, one hand dropping to the knife at his waist. "Ef it was all my game, he'd stopped behind whar we ketched you both, to feed the buzzards an' coyotes! But the boss wouldn't hev it that way. An' so we hed to tote ye both all this fur—an' pore Jimson Joe layin' out in the damp, too!"

"Where you should be, you cur!" grated Oklahoma Nick, straining at his bonds, his face growing fairly purple with strong emotions. "Fool! that I didn't stop to make sure you were killed, not playing 'possum!"

Jerry Viggles laughed mockingly, though there was a certain tenderness in his touch as one hand rose to his head.

"It wasn't *your* fault that I ain't out yender 'long with Joe, durn ye!" he snarled, viciously. "I kin show the crease o' your lead, an' boss or no boss, it ain't goin' to git clean well until I've got my knife workin' a pritty little hole clean through your blood-pumper! You chaw onto that, Oklahoma Nick!"

Despite the shrinking of the maiden from his loathsome touch, Jerry Viggles felt of her pulse and gazed keenly into her sunken eyes.

"You'll do, pritty," he decided, with an owlish nod of his shaggy head as he stepped back a pace. "The fever's gone, an' you'll be fitter to see the boss when he comes back in the mornin'."

He called out to the guard at the door, who passed the word along to some one else. And in a few moments a tin dish of warm food was handed in to the ruffian, together with a cup of hot coffee.

"Now I'm goin' to stand right over ye, pritty."

"ontel you eat an' drink all this yer chuck," nodded Jerry Viggles, placing the food on the foot of the bunk. "Don't turn up your nose nur yit roll up the eyes o' ye so mighty like a dyin' mule, pritty!" with a coarse laugh. "The boss said you'd got to keep up your strength. He said we'd got to make ye eat when ye come to, even ef we hed to cram it down ye like my ole mammy used to do her fattenin' turkey fer Thanks-givin'."

Otelia saw that the ruffian was in earnest, and she forced herself to eat and drink. And after the first reluctant swallows, she found no further difficulty. Jerry Viggles nodded approvingly as he took up the empty cup and plate, tossing them outside.

"You ain't lovesick, pritty! Ef the boss knowed what a famine he was sighin' fer to make all his own, mebbe he wouldn't be so red-hot fer to git thar! Waal, that's his lookout. All I got to do is to kerry out 'structions; an' the fu'st an' fo'most o' them is not to run any resks o' hevin' either o' you two critters slip through the fingers o' me ag'in. An' so—cuts me clean to the gizzard—but I cain't help it!"

With a strong cord he bound the maiden, hand and foot, leaving her helpless on the bunk. He bent over Oklahoma Nick, looking carefully to his bonds, then gave him a parting kick as he left the cabin.

Otelia saw this, and her suspicions were greatly weakened. Surely Van Bibber was not in league with these ruffians! Surely he would not be bound and treated so brutally if her suspicions had any foundation in fact?

She spoke to him, but there came no reply. With a painful effort she turned her head sufficiently to catch a glimpse of him as he lay on the earthen floor, face downward, shivering, faintly moaning. If not suffering bodily torture, he was mentally wretched.

"Nick—Mr. Van Bibber!" she repeated, but there came no response to her call, other than a deeper, more bitter groan.

She fell back, wondering, thinking—ah! if she did not have to think! If she could only pass back to oblivion again! To be forced to think—to have all those horrors brought up before her, one after another—was more bitter than death!

Outside she could now distinguish the sound of rattling pots and metal dishes. She could smell the scent of cooking meat and boiling coffee. And the growing gloom within the little shanty told her that the day must be dying.

More than a day since she was torn from her parents! More than four-and-twenty hours since they were left so cruelly bound, so utterly helpless! How had they endured the trial? Had it killed them? Were they dead when Perry came to relieve them? Or—had he come?

She called to Oklahoma Nick once more, that horrible fear too great to resist.

"Perry—my brother. You said he was well—that he had gone back to camp, Nicholas Van Bibber. Tell me again that it was so. Tell me that you spoke the truth to me then, and not a lie! I fear—"

"It was for your own good, as I thought then, 'Telie," came the hoarse, choking reply. "I wanted to give you strength for the long and weary ride. And I knew that if I told you the whole truth, it would crush out your poor remnant—"

A low, agonized wail cut him short.

"You lied to me! He is dead—my poor brother!" she moaned.

"Not dead—I swear to you by all that is pure and holy!" the guide uttered, speaking clearly, yet not loud enough to attract attention from without. "He met with an accident, but not death. I left him comfortable enough, hastening to fetch you and his mother to nurse him, when I chanced to meet those demons with you a captive."

"Yet you swore— Oh! my brother!"

Though Oklahoma Nick could not see her face, he knew that the poor girl had swooned, and his sharp yell quickly brought Jerry Viggles once more into the cabin. And amid cursing and splutterings, Otelia was restored to her senses once more.

Jerry Viggles beat a retreat, grumbling and snarling at the work which "the boss" had shoved off on to his shoulders.

Now that she knew the worst, Otelia tried to steady her shattered nerves, thinking, thinking, trying to see some hope through the gloom.

And as she lay thus, Oklahoma Nick was working at his bonds.

The gloom increased to darkness within the cabin, though a few thin rays of red light streamed in through the chinks between the logs from the camp-fire without. And the rough, coarse jests of the outlaws gathered about the fire could be distinguished by the captives.

"Telie!" cautiously called out the guide.

"You can hear me?"

"I hear you," was the low response.

"Telie, do you know what those demons intend doing with us?"

"Kill me, I hope," was the bitter response.

"What is life worth now, when all—father, another, brother—are dead?"

"They are living—they are not dead! I

swear it to you! They are still living, and may yet be saved, if we can only get free. 'Telie?"

There was no reply, but Oklahoma Nick knew that the poor girl was listening, too deeply agitated for articulate speech, and he added:

"Telie, I heard those demons talking while you were insensible. They said that you were to be forced into marrying their boss; that he has gone to bring a preacher or a magistrate, or something of the sort; that he is expected back to-morrow sometime. 'Telie, I heard them say all this, yet it did not kill me!"

Still there was no reply, save that hurried, unsteady breathing.

"Because, 'Telie, I felt that I could either break or slip my bonds and carry you off this night—carry you off to set your parents free before death came to put an end to their torments. 'Telie, you are strong enough to hear what I say without crying out?"

"I hear you—I am strong!" came a faint response.

"Telie, I can do all I said," hurriedly whispered the guide, his voice betraying the depth of his emotions. "I have got my hands free, and I can do the rest in ten minutes. Can—but shall I?"

"Take me to them—take me to my poor parents, Nick!" gasped the agitated girl, trying in vain to rise from the bunk.

"Hist! be cautious! If those devils suspect anything, our last hope is gone, never to return! 'Telie?"

"Well?" the maiden faintly whispered.

"While they were talking to you, I heard Jerry Viggles mention my name. I heard him say that the boss held a particular grudge against me for some reason. That the boss knew of my love for you, and that he ordered us placed here together, to make our parting all the more bitter to me. That I was to be a witness to your forced marriage with the boss, who would threaten you with even worse should you prove obstinate and refuse to become his wife. And then—when I had suffered all this—I was to be put out of the way forever!"

"But if you are free? If you escape from—"

"Telie, it rests with you whether or no I escape," was the slow, resolute response.

The poor girl was bewildered. She could not understand what he meant by such strange words. He was partly free. He had said he could complete the work and rescue her as well! Then—

"Oh, do not stop to talk!" she gasped, quivering violently with her strong emotions. "Take me away—take me to my poor parents!"

"For what, 'Telie?" the guide said, rising to his feet and coming to the side of the bunk, his hands and feet at liberty. "To have you scorn and flout me as you have done up to this night? To be thrown over like a worn-out glove? Do you think it is worth the trouble?"

"I don't—don't understand you!" the poor girl faltered.

"You must understand me before I take another step in the dark, 'Telie. For your sweet sake, I am willing to risk and do much. I love you so that I often fear I am going mad—that I am mad!"

"See! I am a free man once more. I can easily scratch a hole under the rear wall, large enough to take you outside, and then, in the darkness, I can laugh our enemies to scorn. I can take you to rescue your parents—to save your crippled brother. I can do all this, but shall I? Can I?"

"For the love of kind Heaven—"

"It is your love I ask, 'Telie!" and his hot, feverish hands touched her face, followed by his burning lips for a single instant. "I know you do not love me, as yet; you have told me so often, in looks and actions, if not in so many words. But when I have a chance to prove the depth of my love, it will earn love in return. Say that you will marry me, 'Telie, and I'll save you—I'll save your loved ones too!"

Even in the darkness he could tell how she shrank from him as he whispered so passionately. And with almost savage intensity he added:

"All this I can and will do if you swear by your hopes of a hereafter that you will marry me the first chance we get; but if you refuse to do this—listen, 'Telie!"

"I swear by high Heaven that I will strangle you where you lie! That I will kill you, then give the alarm and die making my teeth meet in the flesh of those rascals outside! Without your love, I don't care to live! Care? I will not live without it! 'Telie!" and his voice grew almost tender as he bent over her, his hot fingers on her bonds. "Say that you will take life for yourself and your family! Say that you will promise—"

"Save them—and I will marry you!"

With strange evenness she uttered the words, but Oklahoma Nick did not pause to ask from whence came that sudden strength. He pressed one burning kiss upon her lips, then busied his fingers with her bonds.

They were not difficult to remove, for Jerry Viggles had hardly counted on her receiving such aid as this. And when once free, Oklahoma Nick fell to work at the rear of the hut, speedily tearing a hole in the comparatively

soft earth sufficiently large enough for their passage.

This accomplished, he stole silently to the front of the cabin, peering through one of the chinks. The fire was kindled almost directly in front of the door, and Jerry Viggles and his gang of ruffians were seated about the cheerful light playing cards, smoking and laughing, cursing or grumbling as fortune swayed.

"They are all there, I think," Oklahoma Nick muttered as he crept back and rejoined the trembling maiden. "It may be that I can pick out a horse or two without arousing their suspicions. If so—and be sure I'll do it if possible—we'll soon be with your folks. But, 'Telie—once more: you swear to marry me?"

"If you succeed in restoring me to them, I will marry you!"

Her tone was cold, her manner anything but that of a maiden who is plighting her troth, but Oklahoma Nick was not critical just then. It was enough for then that she gave her promise, and with a low, gasping murmur, he clasped her almost fiercely to his bosom, pressing his hot lips to hers.

Gently Otelia struggled to release herself, murmuring:

"Think what they must be suffering! Do not lose another moment."

"Follow me then, and be silent as death!" he muttered, leading the way to the hole beneath the logs, causing her to stoop, showing her how she could crawl through the aperture with the least trouble. He passed through first, lending her what aid he could as she followed after.

He paused for a few moments on the outside, listening to see if aught had awakened the suspicions of their enemies; but they caught the coarse, careless chuckle of Jerry Viggles, and knew that all was still going well.

"Come, 'Telie! A few rods, and then you can wait while I try to secure horses," softly breathed the guide, leading the maiden away from the cabin, keeping it between them and the camp-fire.

"Rod after rod, through the scattered trees and bushes. Further and further, without a cry or a shout from the cabin. Then—just as escape seemed assured, a dark figure rose up directly in their path, and with a single blow sent Oklahoma Nick reeling back to trip and fall.

And as a pair of strong arms wound around her, poor Otelia uttered a choking wail of despair, for she felt that all was lost.

CHAPTER XIX.

JERRY VIGGLES COMES TO GRIEF.

GRAVE, almost stoical though she had seemed ever since her first appearance at the cavern, Molly Feathertop could not stand by and see her twins thus unceremoniously "put in soak." With a flashing look at Boomer Balt that seemed enough to crisp up his long white beard, she snatched the twins from the bewildered boomer, bearing them away in safety to the further end of the rock-chamber.

And seemingly utterly overwhelmed with a sense of the awful enormity into which his headlong enthusiasm had plunged him, Uncle Balt meekly stole away, followed by Dick McBride, who would not be content with less than full explanation of what the veteran had accomplished since their parting on the night before.

"Don't you ever tell anybody I said so, pard," confidentially whispered the boomer guide; "but thar was more stud-hoss luck then science into it—so they was!"

He told how he set out on the quest for the remainder of the Wright family, without the faintest idea as to where they were likeliest to be found. He only knew that the party under McBride, having taken their horses, must naturally keep away from the broken ground, at least until the darkness faded. That led him to skirting the broken ground instead, on foot.

"An' right thar's whar I ketched cn, pard!" the veteran chuckled.

It was nearly noon when he first sighted a party of horsemen, accompanied by a single wagon, making for the hills a couple of miles below the spot where he had climbed to gain a more extensive view of the comparatively level expanse. He felt that this must be the gang of Jerry Viggles, and hastened to cut them off.

Owing to the broken ground, he failed in doing this, but came near enough to strike their trail and follow it up until he discovered the spot where they went into camp, without himself being seen or his presence suspected.

"Did you see the lady, or anything of Oklahoma Nick?"

"Never a glimpse," was the prompt response. "Reekon they was both fetched long in the kivered wagon."

"Unless you hit the wrong outfit!" dubiously muttered McBride.

"Be I that scrt?" reproachfully asked Boomer Balt. "Be I sech a billy-be-dummed fool es to slap my good money onto the mule when I knows the boss is gwine to come under the wire head-up-an'-tail-a-risin', a double distance ahead? Didn't I sneak round thar ontel I see they was somebody kept mighty snug in th' old shack? Didn't I snake up to the hind side o' the

cabin an' take a peek in? Didn't I see the lady layin' thar on a bunk, more like a angel then—Molly Feathertop ain't nigh enough to listen, is she?" with sudden agitation.

There was more talk on the subject, but it is hardly necessary to give it in detail, since enough has already been recorded to shadow forth the result. Enough that Boomer Balt convinced all concerned that he had made a most important discovery, and that preparations were at once made for the rescue of Otelia Wright, and the condign punishment of her kidnappers.

It was with difficulty that Evander Wright could be persuaded to remain behind; but he was finally convinced that in his present greatly weakened condition, he would only prove an incumbrance on the party. And so he remained behind, with his wife and Molly Feathertop and the patriotically-named twins, to take care of the young giant.

Boomer Balt led the little party on their mission of mercy with all the ease of a man who had made a study of the locality for ages. He seemed never at a loss, and enabled the party to take their horses to a point which he asserted was within half a mile of the retreat where Jerry Viggles and his gang were to be found. Dismounting, tying and leaving their animals to pass the time as best they could, the little band stole silently forward, Boomer Balt still in advance, still picking his way without doubt or hesitation.

A little circle brought them out at the rear of the cabin, and it was with the intention of making sure that the captive had not been removed from the shack that Boomer Balt and Dick McBride, leaving the remainder of the party behind, stole forward through the timber until a barely perceptible hiss from the lips of the guide called the scout's attention to a couple of phantom-like figures that suddenly came into view from the rear of the cabin.

They were Oklahoma Nick and Otelia Wright, as the reader already knows. And it was the brawny arm of Dick McBride that sent the guide reeling back, to stagger and fall; his deadly grip that fastened upon Oklahoma Nick before the half-stunned guide could rise or defend himself; but it was Boomer Balt who caught the half-swooning maiden in his arms, and Boomer Balt who cut short her wailing shriek of utter despair—by pressing his rosy, white-bearded face fairly against hers!

Closely following that cry, there came a shrill, mocking laugh from beyond the cabin, as though Jerry Viggles was in high spirits about something; but swiftly as Boomer Balt drew a weapon and turned to defend his prize, it was labor wasted.

Jerry Viggles broke into a wild, rough song, his voice "cracking" dismally on the higher notes, to make ample amends by "droning" most dismally when he "went down in his boots" for the last bars of each verse. Clearly the outlaws had not taken the alarm!

Otelia lay such a heavy weight across his arm that Boomer Balt knew she had fainted, and thoroughly alive to the perils of the moment, he turned hastily to lend McBride assistance in overpowering Oklahoma Nick. But this aid was not needed. That deftly-delivered blow had knocked pretty much all the strength out of the guide, and the athletic scout quickly choked out the remainder.

He was now stuffing a doubled rag between the relaxed jaws of his captive, whom he then lifted and flung across his bowed back, hastily yet silently retreating with his burden to the spot where the main force had been left in ambush. And closely following him came Boomer Balt, bearing the insensible maiden in his arms as he might have borne one of those wonderful twins!

All was excitement then, as a matter of course, though kept in subjection lest the gang of ruffians take the alarm and escape by a sudden "scatteration" through the night, as Boomer Balt expressed it.

A bit of rope quickly put Oklahoma Nick beyond making trouble should he recover his senses before the job was completed, and Otelia Wright was placed in the care of one of the soldiers.

"Course you want to see the rest o' the fun," chuckled Boomer Balt to Henry Hornkohl, with a peculiar emphasis. "Ef I didn't know that so monstrous well, I'd 'a' axed you to stop with the leddy!"

The detective said naught in reply, but he cast more than one interested glance in the direction of the still unconscious maiden while the general plan was decided upon. That was easy enough to arrange.

The band was to divide evenly, and each endeavor to skirt the camp-fire, thus surrounding the outlaws with the least loss of time. When Boomer Balt, who was to head one division, should give the signal by imitating the call of the big horned owl, each man was to step out and cover the rascals with their rifles.

"Don't pull trigger unless they make a break or try to slip in a shot," impressively cautioned the chief of scouts. "We want to take them prisoners, not butcher them!"

There was no objection made to this, and then

the little party divided, Henry Hornkohl keeping close to the heels of Boomer Balt.

Jerry Viggles had concluded his song by the time these preparations were made, and amid the sycophantic cheering and applause which followed the tremendous effort of their chief, the rascals heard nothing of what was taking place just without the circle of light.

Jerry Viggles, in high good humor, rose to his feet, doffing his hat with an exaggerated bow as he prepared to return thanks for the enthusiastic reception of his song. When—

A snarling cry rung out on the night, and a white-haired figure leaped clear across the fire, clutching the startled outlaw by the throat, shaking him back and forth much as a bull-dog might shake an impudent terrier!

"You devil! At last! At last! I've got ye now!"

Boomer Balt fairly lifted Jerry Viggles from his feet by that awful grip on his throat, then hurled him to the ground as though meaning to crush every bone in his body!

With wild cries of wilder alarm, the gang leaped up and drew their weapons. Taken fully as much by surprise, the rescuing party hesitated for an instant; but then the clear voice of Dick McBride rung out as he broke cover with leveled rifle:

"Hands up and surrender, you devils! Death to the man that tries to burn powder or— Will you?"

His weapon cracked sharply as it sent a bullet crashing through the arm of Tommy Ducklegs, causing the half-breed to drop the pistol with which he was about venturing a snap-shot.

"Give quarter to all who yield and hold up hands!" cried the scout, his rifle ready for another shot as his eyes flashed over the startled group. "Riddle the fool that dares hold on to a gun!"

The yell of agony that broke from the lips of Tommy Ducklegs was even more influential than that stern speech, and the surrounded rascals dropped their tools and sung out for quarter as a single man!

"Keep them covered, and shoot at the first crooked motion," hurriedly cried McBride as he rushed forward and caught Boomer Balt by the arms, fairly tearing him from the shivering form of Jerry Viggles. "You old fool! do you want to murder the rascal?" he grated, twisting the guide's arms behind him, one knee pressed into the small of his back, effectually paralyzing the veteran.

"I fergot—I couldn't hold on to myself when I see the ugly face o' him!" gasped the guide, his usually rosy face white as chalk. "Let me go, an' look to the critter. I won't tetch him no more. Only—don't let him croak too soon!"

"It isn't your fault if he's living," harshly laughed the scout as he released the guide, casting a precautionary glance around before dropping to his knees beside the senseless ruffian. "It's no fault of yours that every man-jack of 'em didn't get away through your foolish tricks!"

"Shell I ax the boys to buck an' gag me?" meekly asked the veteran, with a husky laugh. "Shell I git down on the two knees o' me an' chew dirt? Shell I—"

"Go and take up a collection from these worthy hang-dogs, rather," McBride laughingly exclaimed, as he sprung to his feet. "This fellow won't make us any trouble for—"

"I didn't kill him? Don't you say that, pard!"

Dick McBride stared in astonishment at the speaker as he dropped to his knees beside Jerry Viggles. What was all this agitation born of? Surely not through remorse? He had tried his level best to kill the rascal, and now—

The worthy scout turned away with a grunt of mingled surprise and disgust. There was no time to waste over such a ridiculous affair. These ruffians were dangerous as long as their claws were uncut.

Under his watchful eye and weapons, the outlaws were disarmed and securely bound, Henry Hornkohl falling to work with an adroit precision that drew a compliment from the chief; he was a natural-born thief-taker!

Boomer Balt soon discovered that Jerry Viggles was only stunned and choked to unconsciousness; and when fully assured that the fellow would soon recover, little the worse for his rough experience, the veteran guide rallied and was soon his usual self, lending a hand in securing the prisoners.

He shortly afterward drew Dick McBride aside, talking to him rapidly, earnestly. And then, bidding Henry Hornkohl make ready for a brisk ride, he went back to where Oklahoma Nick and Otelia Wright were in charge of the soldier.

The maiden was conscious, and Boomer Balt immediately took her trembling hands, bidding her hope for the very best.

"It's al'ays darkest jest afore day, pritty," he added, his voice taking on that strange hoarseness which Henry Hornkohl had noticed when the guide was confronted by Evander Wright in the cavern. "The clouds hev bin mighty black an' threatenin' fer you, but the sun is already risin' in the sky, an'—you kin b'ar up under good news?"

"Tell me—my poor—"

"They're waitin' fer you, pritty, to make the bull family complete! All alive, all lackin' only your comin' to make it a jolly jubilee! An' you're goin' to git thar jest as quick as hoss-flesh kin kerry you!"

Leaving Dick McBride to still further explain, Boomer Balt hastened away to bring horses. When he returned, Otelia fully comprehended what was in store for her, and eagerly protested she was able to ride alone and unassisted. But Boomer Balt would not listen to this. Her strength had already been too sorely tried, and fearing to waste more time in arguing, Otelia submitted to his will.

The saddle was arranged for her riding, and when she was safely placed therein, Boomer Balt sprang upon the horse behind her. Henry Hornkohl insisted on accompanying them by way of guard, though there was no further danger to apprehend. But it was too joyous a time for carping, and so off they set, each one quite as eager as the other to gain the cavern in the shortest possible time.

On the way Boomer Balt told Otelia much that had been but partly explained by McBride, and she listened eagerly enough, now that her worst fears were set at rest.

Henry Hornkohl had little to say as they rode along. Boomer Balt seemed to wish him to keep in the background, and the detective apparently was quite content to do so. But as he rode, he keenly watched the veteran, those old suspicions gaining in strength with each minute. Although he could not account for it in any reasonable manner, the detective felt almost certain, now, that the will which had been the means of leading him into so much trouble and excitement, was but part of a curious farce; for he would be almost willing to make oath that this rosy-faced old man was none other than Onesiphorus Wright!

The trip was accomplished in safety, and leading to the ground at the foot of the winding trail, Boomer Balt caught the maiden up in his arms, bearing her up the hill to the cave entrance. He set her on her feet, whispering hastily in her ear:

"Go right in, pritty! Go right in an' fill them chuck-up with joy an' pure happiness!"

Otelia did not wait to hear him out, but with a glad, sobbing cry, she sprung into the rock-chamber, her arms outstretched, her face lit up with a joy beyond the power of words to express.

In an instant she was caught in the trembling arms of her mother. And the arms of Evander Wright were about them both. And each one was laughing and crying in the same breath.

Then—Perry Wright opened his eyes and stared about him. He caught sight of Otelia, and faintly pronounced her name.

"Brother—oh, my precious!" panted Otelia, as she slipped free from her parents and sprung to the couch, sobbing and kissing her twin.

"Telie—this is awful good!" murmured Perry; then adding: "But where is he? Telie, I've seen and heard Maurice North! Where is he?"

CHAPTER XX.

BOOMER BALT'S LITTLE SURPRISE-PARTY.

"LADIES an' gents! We 'pear afore ye this evenin' fer— Why don't ye make your manners, pard?"

Boomer Balt was the speaker, of course. He opened in regular "stage fashion," with one hand thrust into his bosom, the other shooting out at an abrupt angle; only to cut himself short with a sharp "aside," as he scowled portentously at the figure standing behind and a little to one side of his position. The figure of a man, but covered from crown to sole with a rudely-stitched bag of Government blankets, and supported on either side by a grinning soldier.

There had been considerable bustle, much whispering and going and coming, almost ever since the arrival at the cavern of Otelia Wright, and it was now pretty well along in the afternoon of the succeeding day. Perhaps it was well that the Wright family had so much to think of and talk about together, else they might have grown inconveniently curious as Boomer Balt and Dick McBride and their aids bustled about like men filled with some mighty mystery.

Henry Hornkohl, too, was left out in the cold, though, after one or two little rebuffs, he coolly accepted the situation and lazily watched the performance. When he was not engaged in telling his story to the Wright family, that is. For now that they were reunited, and Perry gave such unmistakable signs of improvement, one and all felt a strong curiosity to learn everything possible about this wonderful fortune left them by the almost unknown "Uncle Oney."

A screen of blankets sewn together was run along in front of the passage leading into the cavern. Candles and lanterns were lighted. A huge fire was kept going at the rear of the cavern, thus lighting up the rock chamber with almost the clearness of the noonday sun.

All of the party, save Boomer Balt and two soldiers, were seated in front of the "curtain,"

when the guide stepped forth, followed by his two aids, who led in that curiously veiled figure.

As Boomer Balt uttered that stage whisper, he nodded to the grinning soldiers, one of whom dropped a heavy hand on the head of the blanketed shape, forcing it to bow.

"Scuse my pard, ladies an' gents," blandly bowed Boomer Balt. "He feels kinder bashful, jest at fu'st. That's why we hed to kiver his blushin' face with a blanket. Never knowed but one bashfuller an' modester gent in all my life; would tell ye his name, ef it wasn't ag'in' the rules o' good breedin' fer a man to sing his own praises in meetin'—ahem!"

"Ladies an' gents! The subjeck which I perpose fer to show up this evenin' is one that'll interest the hull kit-an'-b'ilin' of ye! Ef you like to call it a lectur', I ain't objectin', an' would meekly hint that a title somethin' like 'The Nat'ral Cussedness o'—' But that won't work, nuther! They ain't nothin' human 'bout my subjeck 'cept his shape."

"Call it a surprise-party, and let her went!" cried Dick McBride.

"By any other name he'll smell jest as sweet, so let it go at what the good gent so kindly suggests," bowed Boomer Balt, then clearing his throat and squaring his shoulders like one "getting down to business."

"Once upon a time they was a young feller who struck a streak o' mighty bad luck. We won't call no names, fer they's them in hearin' who mought feel hurt ef we did. 'Nough to say that this young gent was 'cused of murderin' another feller, after a night o' gamblin' an' drinkin' in comp'ny. They was tol'able hefty proof fetched ag'inst him when he hed his 'liminary 'zamination—so hefty it seemed that he was held fer funder trial. Mebbe I ain't dead-open-an'-shet on my legal tarmes, but I hope the orjience 'll 'scuse me, 'long of a powerful sore throat!"

Henry Hornkohl smiled faintly as he recognized that old change of voice, then cast a swift covert glance around at the pale, startled face of Otelia Wright. She was gazing intently at the speaker, her red lips parted, her breath coming fast and short.

"Waal, to make a long story short, that young feller manidged to git out o' the jug, an' run clean away afore the law could hang him, es more'n one counted on it to do. An' why did he run away? Beca'se he knowed that he never killed George Humphrey. Beca'se he knowed that ef he was to stay an' stretch hemp fer what he never done, he'd stan' a 'mighty poor show o' ever bein' able fer to show who *did* do the killin'. An' right thar's whar I think the lad's head was 'mighty level!"

"Ef Maurice North *didn't* kill George Humphrey, *who did*? Pard;" and Boomer Balt turned to the blanketed figure, "kin you tell us?"

One of the soldiers forced the covered head to bow assent.

"Pard, was it *you* did the killin'?"

Again that enforced bow.

"So much settled, ladies an' gents," cheerfully added Boomer Balt, with a gratified grin as he again faced his startled, wondering audience. "That's the fu'st chapter; now fer the second."

A wave of his hand, and the soldiers took their charge back behind the blanket, returning with Jerry Viggles and Jack Howgood in charge. Both were bound, and between each pair of jaws were inserted stout gags. Each rascal looked frightened nearly into fits, and had to be supported by their guards.

"More nat'ral cussedness, ladies an' gents," bowed Boomer Balt, his rosy countenance expressive of intense disgust as he slowly surveyed the two prisoners. "When I git more time, I'll git down on the two knees o' me an' chaw dirt fer 'sultin' of ye with sech comp'ny; but jest now—'Tention, critters!"

The prisoners started, shivering with terror, but managing to keep their eyes fixed on the face of the white-haired lecturer.

"Jerry Viggles, an' you, Jack How-mighty-bad, wasn't you the two tramps that swore to the killin' of George Humphrey?"

The prisoners nodded assent.

"Wasn't you hired to tell that story? Wasn't you paid to stick George Humphrey? Didn't you do it? Didn't you kill him with the knife your 'ployer give you?"

And to each question asked, the trembling rascals nodded assent.

A motion, and the prisoners were taken behind the blanket. Back the soldiers came, leading the blanketed figure. And closely following them came Molly Feathertop with her twins.

The voice of Boomer Balt was softer, more natural as he spoke:

"Molly, I hate to do it, but jestice demands that I ax you, afore these ladies an' gents: do you know who that critter is?"

"My husband," coldly responded the Indian woman.

"You ain't makin' no mistake? You've tuck a good, squar' look under that kiverin'? Ef you was axed, Molly, you'd take oath that you was regularly married to that man?"

"I will swear to all," was the deliberate response. "He came and said he loved me. I was only an Indian girl, but my people were rich;

they sent me to the white man's school. There I learned too much not to be sure that the marriage was legal. I married that man. A preacher of the gospel performed the ceremony. He lived with me, claiming all the rights of one of our tribe, until our children were born. Then—he robbed me and run away."

"From the twins too, mind ye, ladies an' gents!" added Boomer Balt in a solemn tone, shaking his head lugubriously as he gazed wonderingly at that blanketed figure. "An' sech twins! Look at 'em, an'—"

But Molly Feathertop caught them up and beat a hasty retreat.

Boomer Balt stepped forward and swiftly lifted the covering from the prisoner. And there stood revealed Nicholas Van Bibber.

Pale, wild-eyed, but defiant. Defeated at all points, yet refusing to quail. In only one thing did he show feeling: he never once permitted his gaze to wander to where Otelia Wright sat, tremblingly clasped by the one sound arm of the young giant.

Boomer Balt cut the thongs that kept the gag in place, then stepped back, cold and grave, his voice hard and stern as he spoke:

"You have heard all, Nicholas Van Bibber. Dare you deny aught that has been told here this evening?"

Oklahoma Nick laughed harshly, then replied: "It's truth, as far as you've gone, Maurice North, but—"

A faint, gasping cry came from the rear of the cavern, and Otelia Wright sprung erect, her arms outstretched.

And Boomer Balt only took one leap to cross the intervening space.

The night was far spent, yet not one of all the party even gave a thought to the lateness of the hour, or of sleep. There was so much to tell, so much to listen to in return!

Oklahoma Nick, when he found that Jerry Viggles and Jack Howgood had betrayed him, in hopes of lessening their own punishment, knowing that he had forever lost the maiden whom he loved so insanely, made a reckless confession in which many an otherwise puzzling point was cleared away.

He had planned the death of George Humphrey and hired the two desperadoes to carry out his foul plot. Even then he was in love with Otelia Wright, though he went away when she rejected his suit, some little time after the escape of Maurice North, which she and Perry had effected.

Drifting into the Indian Nation, Van Bibber saw that a fortune might easily be made by an unscrupulous man, and to guard himself against ejection, he courted and won Molly Feathertop, daughter of a Cherokee chief. But the old mad love haunted him, and he made poor Molly but an indifferent husband. It was during one of his occasional trips to civilization that he met Henry Hornkohl, and was startled by being asked about Evander Wright. He had heard some idle chat concerning "Uncle Oney," and suspecting something of the truth, he drugged the detective, robbing him of his papers, then killing him, as he believed.

Learning of the vast fortune left the Wright family, he resolved to gain at least a portion of it, and at once set out for the place. He found Evander Wright dissatisfied, and already interested in the then famous Oklahoma region. This gave him a clew, and though Otelia treated him coldly, he persisted until Evander Wright sold out, and with him as guide, started on that eventful trip.

Oklahoma Nick felt that the old people were on his side, and so he resolved to spare their lives if he could win Otelia by fair means. Perry he doomed, both because he felt the youth disliked him, and would uphold Otelia in her refusal of his suit, and because he would be a sharer in that coveted fortune.

It was with a double plan in view that Oklahoma Nick set Jerry Viggles and his gang to work. If Perry could be won over to assist him in winning Otelia, he would spare his life. If not, a trap was set to bring about his death. The reader knows how Oklahoma Nick tried to win the young giant over, feeling that with his persuasion, Otelia would soon yield to his love. Failing, he led the youth into the trap.

That failed to work quite as smoothly as expected, owing to the manner in which the young giant leaped upon Grasshopper Boy, dragging the Indian down to death. All but that was a farce.

It was to make sure Perry was dead, rather than through any motives of mercy that led Oklahoma Nick to his side, down the canyon. And when Perry begged the guide to bring Telie, a new hope flashed across that cunning brain. And he hastened to carry out the rest of his intricate plot. Of course the encounter with Jerry Viggles and Jimson Joe with Otelia a captive was part of the scheme, and the firing but a specious blind. So, too, was the falling in with the outlaws under Jack Howgood. But Oklahoma Nick had not counted on that, after the escape of Perry Wright; if he could have won a single gleam of hope from the maiden during that ride, he would have taken her at once to

the camp where her parents were left, then hastened back to the canyon where Perry lay.

But Otelia would not listen to his suit, and his new hope was at once abandoned. What followed may be readily interpreted by the reader without any further waste of words.

Laughingly "Boomer Balt" explained why he had sought to mystify Henry Hornkohl. He suspected him of having more than one purpose in view; suspected him of hunting for Maurice North, for whom, as an escaped assassin, there was a liberal reward offered. And to cover his own identity, he half hinted that he was none other than the eccentric "Uncle Oney," come to life for some odd purpose. And, too, he let drop hints that he believed the detective Maurice North himself, as a still further safeguard.

Never mind the explanation he gave of his long absence and complete silence after his escape. Enough that he suspected Nicholas Van Bibber, and kept close on his track, hunting proof to confirm those suspicions. It was during this search that he made the acquaintance of Molly Feathertop and her twins. She had left her people, to live alone in the hills, after the desertion by her husband. Many a night had "Boomer Balt" passed beneath her roof, and hence it was that he thought of going for her when Perry Wright needed good nursing.

Molly Feathertop willingly consented to take part in the "surprise party" when she learned how evilly Oklahoma Nick had plotted. Her love was dead, and she longed for revenge of some sort.

Satisfied that "the boomers" would not require an armed escort out of the Territory, Dick McBride parted from them, with his prisoners, promising to put Jerry Viggles, Jack Howgood and Nicholas Van Bibber where they could readily be found when wanted to answer for their crimes.

And, to dispose of them briefly, the two former were convicted of murdering George Humphrey, while Oklahoma Nick went to prison for a good long term, as an accessory.

"Boomer Balt" safely piloted the Wright family back across the border, then blossomed out as Maurice North, the husband of Otelia.

Henry Hornkohl reported his complete success to his employers, and received a reward far greater than he had expected, even in his most sanguine moments, after the will of Onesiphorous Wright was probated and all legal formalities were complied with.

And then, a year later, Maurice North and his charming wife, paid a visit to the Cherokee Nation for the express purpose of seeing Molly Feathertop and those remarkable twins. They found the deserted wife once more living with her people, and quite contented. And what a jolly time "Boomer Balt" and "those twins" did have!

THE END.

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